Evaluations of ILO/IPEC projects aimed at elimination of the worst forms of child labour in Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Egypt.

The mission for the cluster evaluation of DANIDA (Danish aided funding) Country Programmes in Cambodia, Egypt and Sri Lanka took place over May and June 2003. The initial briefing took place in the IPEC Department of the International Labour Office in Geneva and the mission concluded with a debriefing there about the end of June following. The final reports took substantially more time to prepare. I found I was under immense pressure to make a survey, analyse and reach conclusions and make presentations on them to governments over a very limited timescale. In each country as an independent external evaluator/team leader I was assisted by a national consultant.

I took this picture of a child pulling two women in the heat: an everyday occurrence on the Cambodian/Thai border.

I can't say I have looked forward to writing this chapter. Although I undertook the mission some six or seven years ago leafing through my report and looking at the photographs I took of these children bring out feelings of deep sadness and a sense of impotence and questioning as to whether I did all I could for them.

My missions to other countries involved examining different education systems, their relevance and their efficiencies and the products of such systems. During this mission I saw examples of five and six and seven-year-olds, boys and girls failed by the education system, who had been maltreated and abused and who would carry this
experience with them through the rest of their lives. Indeed many of these lives could inevitably be harsh, cruel and short.

Given the shockwaves which have arisen from the recent Ryan Report here in Ireland in 2011 as well as internationally throughout English-speaking Roman Catholic communities on the abuse of vulnerable children in state institutions run by the Roman Catholic religious I am aware of psychological damage and trauma which these children would have endured. It makes me quite uncomfortable to sit here, enjoying the company of our grandchildren when I consider these vulnerable young children, millions of them across the world, who don't have someone to cherish them - but the contrary - and more often treated as mere beasts of burden: whether in domestic service or put to work in appalling conditions in tanneries or brick factories or pulling loads. Of the young girls sold into prostitution: many of them will have given birth to children for whom they will do their best or will have been infected by HIV AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases or often have to cope with both conditions.

I have often asked myself why these innocents must be so deprived of the love and support we all must have.

Some of these children – the lucky ones - will have been rescued by organisations or NGOs who will try to patch up their lives and rehabilitate them with some or other form of basic education and/or training. But the scale of child labour is so huge in the countries I visited and so entrenched and the efforts to resolve it are so relatively small.

In many of these countries and especially the countries of the Far East there is unfortunately little concern at government level for the rights of the child, especially the girl child. Without strong, determined, government support in countries where severe poverty is endemic it can be expected that police and social services in many cases will be prepared to turn a deaf ear, to accept bribes and to collude to ensure that the brothels are kept full with these innocent vulnerable victims. Their co-operation -
such as there is - has often had to be obtained under pressure through threats of for example the withholding of wider international donor support.

For me - I found the mission traumatic. There was the increasing awareness of the scale of the problem and lack of capacity shown by many bureaucrats to tackle it. I was horrified at what was happening and so much taken aback by the relatively small impacts that the DANIDA funded interventions had made. There was no doubt but that Egypt was far and away the country which had identified the issue and which was addressing it with none other than the then President’s wife, Mrs. Mubarrak, in the driving seat.

To be fair to the other two countries they were either involved in civil war with the Tamil Tigers as was the case in Sri Lanka or had just emerged from the Pol Pot regime where a huge proportion of the population had been eliminated by that mad man and his cronies in the ‘Killing Fields’ of Phnom Penh. I had been on previous missions to both Egypt and Cambodia in relation to education and TVET reforms. But in my understanding of the situation in both countries during earlier missions I had no awareness that child labour was endemic.

On a physical level the stress of visiting three countries with a day’s flying in between meetings and taking notes and preparation of the relevant reports was a punishing routine. I suppose on the ground I wanted to avoid being ‘managed’ and to see for myself. So I tried hard to go into the bush and to escape from any ‘minders’ provided.

Poverty at the household level has been identified as the main cause of child labour. Single parent families and domestic violence also constitute significant causative factors. It is estimated that about one fifth of the population in Sri Lanka lives below the poverty line and this was before the Tsunami struck in 2008. While considerable progress has been made in reducing the human development dimension of poverty through improvements in literacy and mortality, particularly improvements in primary school enrolments and child survival - unfortunately poverty levels have continued to remain relatively high. Studies have shown that despite improvements in primary school enrolment, school drop-outs at an early stage come from poor families. Lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing, stationary, bus fare and lack of support and guidance from the family are common problems among most children who opt to leave school at an early age. Further, many of these children particularly the girl children are forced to become care-givers to their younger siblings at the expense of their own schooling.

A further factor that contributes directly to the physical and inevitably to sexual abuse of children was the displacement of entire families as a result of civil war. For nearly two decades armed conflict has adversely affected every area of civilian life in Sri Lanka and within this context it is women and children who are most affected. An assessment of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) fighters killed in combat as quoted by the Situation Analysis1 revealed that 40% of their fighting forces were both males and females between 9 and 18 years of age. In the Summary Report of 1999, it was stated that the armed conflict has displaced an estimated 380,000 children and many of them

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repeatedly. This has resulted in the breakdown of the family unit and many children have been removed from their parents and have suffered as the unfortunate victims of circumstance. In a CENWOR study published in 1999\(^2\), it was reported that children in refugee camps are at risk and are vulnerable to being picked up by agents for domestic service. These conditions had been compounded by the recent boom in the tourism industry.

Then there are the thousands of migrant mothers from low income families who are forced through poverty to find work abroad and to leave behind young children with the attendant social and moral problems. Where the mother leaves to work overseas there becomes the subsequent risk of neglect through exposure to exploitation of the children. It doesn’t say a lot about the morality of some fathers. It was estimated that there were more than 500,000 such families.

It is recognised that children left behind, especially young girls in such families have to assume adult chores and responsibilities for even younger siblings. Children parked out by the father with relations or the extended family are identified to be especially at risk of abuse.

It had been found to be extremely difficult to capture hard information on any forms of child labour: this was especially the case on the worst forms. The government agencies and the implementing partners have lacked the experience and specialised knowledge in tracking these abuses. Amongst the first lessons learned is the need to involve the social partners - and a surprise for me - especially the trade unions. Through their branch networks they can provide access deep into the communities whether geographically to the plantation workers of Sri Lanka or the labouring communities of the Nile Valley.

Cambodia was different. As noted above it shares an attitude frequently encountered in the countries of Asia of indifference to the rights of the female. In Cambodia the evaluation team was advised it is particularly difficult as the legal maze is very often compounded with indifference or lack of commitment among the police and the judiciary at the local level. From the information available it appeared that less than 10% of such cases of abuse as taken in the courts were successful in securing convictions. Also in Cambodia, a significant shortcoming was the omission to include in national surveys certain categories of child labour, especially sex workers which affects mainly girl children.

Overall there were gaps in relation to information on trafficking, sexual abuse and child porterage etc. Many interventions although perceived to be relevant and appropriate have involved at most hundreds of children rather than the huge numbers involved. There was not the sense of a holistic approach covering the effective rehabilitation and alternative employment creation for rescued children of this magnitude or on a scale or which offered the prospect of moving forward to an integrated nation-wide response. On the other hand, there was broad agreement that not all awareness campaigns had been successful. In the poorest remote areas where

abuse exists and where attempts have been made to promote awareness there have been setbacks and tough learning experiences.

There was an absence noted amongst several agencies to reflect on the rescue and remedial tasks they perform and to share and adopt best practices. One poignant example encountered is the rescue of young girls and mothers from sexual exploitation by NGOs\(^3\) and their rehabilitation through low-value extended training courses. Unfortunately, the income generating skills they received did not always guarantee them a basic survival wage and they found little option but to return to their previous way of life. In contrast the better thought-through schemes witnessed during the evaluations were those which do not concentrate only on rescuing the children but rather are those who see the need to provide the impoverished families as a whole with means for income generation.

While some issues such as lack of detailed information on the worst forms of child labour and indeed an absence in some cases of an awareness of the existence of some forms – were common to all three countries – the three countries had responded to such challenges on an individual national basis. The range of responses, as might be expected were predicated by influences from their differing histories, socio-economic frameworks, traditions and confessional approaches as well as to the degree of organisation and commitment of the social partners, especially the trade unions and non-governmental organisations.

In the following pages I have quoted liberally – perhaps not always coherently – from the reports I submitted to ILO/IPEC in Geneva. I don’t apologise for doing this but I hope it will give some flavour of what I came across and of the limited impact of the approaches under way or planned. Sadly, this is a problem which won’t go away. Indeed, I expect it to continue for many decades.

The IPEC Country Programme Management Review for Sri Lanka covering 1997 to 2001\(^4\) noted that the relevant professionals, partner agencies and NGOs acknowledge the existence of street children, child soldiers, children in prostitution, fishing and dry fish industry, breaking stones, gem mining, sand mining and in agriculture but had very little in-depth information on the exact nature and magnitude of child labour in these sectors. Never the less, each year approximately 20,000 children drop out of school. The majority of these school dropouts have no alternative but to drift towards child labour.

Those who drop out from school find their way into the child labour market for different types of occupations. In the plantation sector, for example, children are

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\(^3\) While every child rescued represents a success – there was the strategic need in selecting partners to focus on and to encourage those agencies, trade unions and NGOs, which have had a track record for local expertise and potential for expansion and for mobilising the communities. Perhaps in selection - more attention could have been given to these factors.

\(^4\) This is the period covering the majority of Danida funding.
taken out of school by parents and sent into domestic labour due to economic necessity. Some seventy per cent of Sri Lankan migrant workers overseas are mothers working as domestics. Information available indicates that the mothers of some five hundred thousand poor families had migrated for work abroad, mainly to the Gulf States. Migrant women such as these are themselves very likely to end up in situations of exploitation including young women who may still be technically children or certainly youths/adolescents. A number of interventions, although well targeted and relevant involved at most some hundreds of children under these circumstances – while the problem is in thousands.

Sri Lanka: Young women being provided with fairly basic rehabilitation support by the trades unions.

The apparent absence of a strategic vision concerning the substantial needs and remedial measures required to counter possible abuse of children where the mother is not present, and especially given the dimension of the problem, was seen as grounds for considerable concern. It was found to be extremely difficult to capture relevant information in relation to commercial child sex activity. Estimates from several sources quoted varied from 2,000 to 30,000 children in commercial exploitation. Another source\(^5\) calculated that approximately 10,000 to 20,000 children from rural areas are trafficked and prostituted to paedophiles by organised crime groups.

\(^5\) These figures are based on the sources quoted by the Situation Analysis - see above. They include the CATW Fact Book, citing “Sri Lankan Children for sale on the Internet, UNICEF and ILO – IPEC. Issues relating to commercial sexual exploitation which are likely linked to trafficking (definition ILO C. 182 article 3 and UN Convention Against International Organized Crime Protocol Article 3 normally will come under the TICSA programme in Sri Lanka. Several A/Ps under Danida funding address issues of child sexual exploitation – see Annex.
Official awareness of child exploitation was often low. However, in cases where specific examples were brought to the attention of the authorities then the authorities would act. There appeared to be little understanding or commitment of stakeholders (teachers, principals, law enforcement officials, parents, employers or children themselves) or the community at large. People observed infringements but there appeared to be an attitude problem - or abuse within the family was not seen to be to be a matter for public action - but as something to be resolved within the family.

The survey findings that did exist highlighted that most of the working children in Sri Lanka were employed as family workers in agriculture and in domestic work by their families. These child workers were not covered by Elimination of Worst Form or Child Labour Act or any other labour legislation.

It was considered that male child prostitution may be on the increase but to date very small provision has been made towards establishing the extent; either in terms of numbers or geographical locations. The evaluation mission was informed that it has been established that there are homosexual networks involving male children. The Chairman of the National Child Protection Authority confirmed at a meeting with the mission that, in contrast with developed countries, in Sri Lanka the proportion of abused boys and girls appears to be twenty per cent of boys and ten per cent of girls. He observed it was his opinion that the differences might have to do with the greater degree of protection and supervision traditionally accorded to young girls.

Cambodia

Great poverty is endemic in Cambodia, especially in the rural areas. Cambodia displays examples of the worst form of child labour and trafficking in children for prostitution and also for labour exploitation. Areas for the employment of both boy and girl children include fishing, salt and rubber plantations, children working with rubbish, children working in construction and in the brick factories and child porterage along the Cambodian/Thai border. There have been rapid assessments of child labour in the rubber, salt and fishing sub-sectors. The findings have promoted attention to these areas instead of a holistic multi-sector strategy. Homosexual networks exist in areas of tourism such as Siem Reap where male sex workers cater mostly to paedophiles from the West.

Of the order of 3% of the general population have HIV/AIDs. Anecdotally, it is estimated that some 30% of sex workers have contracted it. At least 10% of sex workers, based on the figures available to the implementing agencies active in this area and funded by Danida, are under age. While individual NGOs have built up partial statistics on the problem there is no integrated study of child sex workers but overall numbers are estimated to number between 20,000 and 50,000. The proportion

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6 Personally I found this revelation to be horrific.
7 It is stressed that a comprehensive set of figures is not available. One NGO, AFESIP, appears to have built up an extensive data base. It also operates in Thailand and Vietnam and continues to build up statistics on cross border trafficking of girl sex workers. Other NGOs appeared only to speak from experience gained in their sometimes narrowly targeted operational areas.
under the age of 18 years of age could be as much as 33%. Other IPEC implementing partners interviewed would contest these estimates, based on their experience of their own geographically targeted areas and would put the numbers somewhat less and between 10% and 20%.

Cambodia: a typical example of child porterage abuse.

The implementation of the laws disadvantages women. A government official interviewed advised that officials including those officially responsible do not work with child sex workers. They insisted that if they become aware of a rape case they will take it up. In 2002, they handled 55 rape cases – a situation which was in itself a gross travesty of the situation. Of the rapists - only about 10% end up in jail. In some instances the police were unable to catch the perpetrators. Some had bought their way out of going to court and for some there was inadequate evidence. Sentences are often appealed to Phnom Penh and the families don’t have the money to travel to give evidence so the cases are dropped.

Under the Cambodian Constitution prostitution is forbidden. The results of the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES 1999) show that out of the 11.2 million total population of Cambodia there were 4.1 million children aged 5 to 17 years. Adopting a restricted definition of the working child the survey estimated that about 1 in every 6 children aged 5 to 17 years old was found to be working, or amounting to of the order of 700,000 children. The survey established that most of the working children (87 per cent) were in rural areas and engaged in primary sector activities. In addition, only 45 per cent of working children aged 5 to 17 were attending school and this proportion was lower for girls than for boys. The hard facts of the situation are that for impoverished girls and women in Cambodia there are few options:

a) About 90% are involved in basic agriculture – working in the fields.
b) About 150,000 women are working under very low salaries in deprived conditions in the garment industry. Many because of the poor conditions and salaries will eventually go into prostitution.
c) The third option is prostitution.
Some forms of child labour were not immediately obvious. They are usually kept hidden from view. For example, in an impoverished community the fact that a child is carrying a 5kg load may not even be remarked upon. Then again it may not be immediately be possible to detect that he/she has been working maybe for twelve hours. A need was identified to promote a wider understanding in the communities and amongst the local authorities of children’s rights under current Cambodian legislation.

Given the dimension of the problem of child labour which is in the hundreds of thousands, the challenge for donors was to come up with a unified process to engage in a meaningful policy dialogue with the government and to identify the steps to be taken to establish an appropriate clearing house for sharing this information.

There is a further need to promote awareness and for strengthening the legislative armoury of the government and to address local indifference and other obstacles restricting their implementation. Experiences cited both by Licadho and by AFESIP\(^8\) two local NGOs grappling with the issue in relation to the awareness raising initiatives are that the impact made is significantly reduced because of the need to target specific ill-educated or illiterate communities without adequate knowledge and because of the lack of commitment encountered among local officials and police. In practice it was explained that with the current level of local indifference most traffickers who have been apprehended can buy themselves free. The police do not generally investigate abuses of children trafficked across the border.

Several ILO/IPEC partners mounted their own awareness campaigns. Impact appears

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\(^8\) These were two very active NGOs who on occasion took the law into their own hands and sometimes with local police support – sometimes without - went in with guns to break up brothels and release children found in them and brought them for rehabilitation and education/training.
to have been significantly reduced because of the failure to target specific ill-educated or illiterate communities without adequate knowledge. Impact was further reduced through obstruction of local officials and members of the police force. The findings were that for an effective awareness campaign to succeed it would have to be driven by the government and focused at a national or provincial level.

The gap between the existing labour and child protection legislation and its implementation by the authorities was raised as a key issue by almost all agencies interviewed. While admittedly this is a difficult area which requires persistence and steadfastness it is felt none the less that the IPEC support through the Cambodian National Committee of the Child and the Child Labour Unit could have achieved more through a greater concentration on policy dialogue with the leading Ministries and government agencies. Further, it was noted that the present move to reform domestic law had had to be deferred during the presence of the mission because an adequate quorum of Assembly Members did not bother to turn up for the vote!

While the Council of Ministers may have adopted child labour as an indicator for charting progress on poverty reduction there none the less appears to be little connection or any formal linkage at the national level between combating abuse of children and the identified priority issues of poverty reduction which attracts considerable international donor support.

Implementing partners complained that impoverished communities are not overly concerned about child labour in their communities. For people in the poverty trap it was explained that it is normal for someone to think first about his/her next meal and where it will come from instead of thinking about the plight of abused children. Often the information they received from the locals was incorrect. Several implementing partners complained that they had received almost no co-operation from the local government officials in the field.
The mission found the local ILO-IPEC representative was reluctant to confront the relevant government agencies to seek redress. Indeed, at the conclusion of the mission and as I was being seen off by my Cambodian counterpart I was asked by this person that he plead with me for a good report - notwithstanding the really egregious failures to act that the mission had uncovered.

Egypt, with a population of some 67 million, far eclipses the populations of either Cambodia or Sri Lanka. As might also be expected the number of children involved in child labour is significantly higher. Estimates of child labour vary widely. It is never the less estimated that the number of children engaged in child labour is of the order of 2.9 million boys and girls. The vast majority of these children work in agriculture – often on their parents’ landholdings. In addition, significant numbers are employed in industries such as the tanning trade and in working in brick kilns and in domestic service in the main conurbations.

Children are employed in hazardous chemical industries and in construction. Estimates in relation to the gender balance between working boys and girls are difficult to come by but it is estimated that very substantially more boys than girls are involved.

Towards the end of the nineties the challenge identified by the Ministry of Manpower was to create mechanisms for handing projects to combat child labour. They saw the problem as the turndown in the economic situation which has affected huge numbers.

9 The Situation of Egyptian Children and Women – a Rights-based Analysis published by UNICEF notes that recent surveys vary widely, due in large part to child work definitions, different survey methodologies and to the fact that surveys take place in different seasons.
of people. It was their view that the alleviation of poverty through income generation has to be done in a structured way. The trade unions have the channels and the local union organisations can guarantee project implementation and the micro-credit operations and the loans provided. It was their appreciation that efforts to mobilise communities against child labour had to be continued and further expanded rather than run the risk of disappointment, loss of credibility and collapse of morale.

Several advocacy measures underlined the then leadership commitment to the issue of child labour. In 2002, the First Lady of Egypt Mrs. Susan Mubarrak launched the global report on child labour for the Arab region. Egypt has celebrated the first Child Labour Day through a sports event that took place with a famous national football player being the guest of honour. Egypt has participated in the Red Card against Child Labour Campaign, by developing and distributing awareness materials nationwide and through the support received from the national football team. In recognition of the child as the heart of its national plans, a childhood component was incorporated into the State's Five Year Development Plan (1997-2002). Egypt has extended the Decade of the Protection of the Egyptian Child for a second decade, covering the period up to 2010.

Through another action programme with the Federation of Egyptian Industry (FEI) IPEC was able to sensitise its board members about the problem of child labour and its consequences on the prospects of Egyptian exports and industries. The programme established a child labour focal point at the FEI through which it’s planned to monitor the phenomena in the Egyptian industries.

In one village I visited in the field the need for income generation projects for families to enable the children to return to school was identified as an early priority. The project started with illiteracy work and with classes in sewing and knitting. The committees utilised all resources of the local government available in their area. In one instance they established a farm with 50 mothers and have provided them with chickens to raise for the market. Other examples include souvenir crafts, shoe making, dairy production, goat raising and basic TVET courses in laundering and in small scale food production through drawing on local non-formal education facilities made available locally. The Ministry of Social Affairs has given some support to the families and some funding has been provided by the trade unions themselves.

In yet another village the focus decided on was educational attainment. Surveys were carried out to find why children drop out of school. The approach to remedy the education deficit was to divide the approaches between primary, preparatory and adult literacy. It was decided to start from the pre-school child. Classrooms were set up – mainly for girls at the earlier stages. At the preparatory levels boys attended separate classes and were provided with some basic vocational training skills. For children over the age of 14 literacy classes were provided. The ultimate goal was prevention of children dropping out of the education system.

A visit was made to the Danida funded Coptic Evangelical Organisation for Social Services (CEOSS) project in Kom Ghorab, an area of slums and ghettos in Old Cairo. With a population of about 25,000 mainly of poor emigrants from Upper Egypt there are severe economic problems combined with large families living in un-sanitised conditions. There are three main occupations available to the inhabitants: to work in
the tanneries or the potteries or brick kilns. CEOSS is one of the oldest NGOs in the social sector in Egypt and works through NGOs based inside the poorest communities.

The CEOSS developed the initial programme using their own staff but soon recognised that in order to ensure continuity and for people to respond they needed to work through local people. Most children coming to the centre suffer from anaemia, fungal infections and parasites. Examinations of children take place and medicines are dispensed through the local government run medical centre. The requirement for screening of children led to a heightened awareness of parents and not just to children to the need for hygiene. Links were established between the children, their parents, the NGO and the medical centre. The medical link is found to be crucial for introducing and maintaining a healthy environment.

CEOSS carried out a comprehensive feasibility study of the community and its resources. It has found there are always some existing resources which can be found and applied. Girls and boys are rescued from the worst forms of child labour. Examples of girls working in tanneries from 10 years of age were targeted. They were given literacy/numeracy classes and even training as beauticians. Some girls have found placement in beautician shops and return to the CEOSS Youth Centre to keep up with their education programme.

During the course of the mission visits took place during Friday and Saturday to NCCM operated sites to see street children being medically examined at one of their centres, which included psychiatric examination. Further visits took place to a Youth Centre in Old Cairo to see recreational activities including football, drama and singing classes provided for working children on their days off by officials of the NCCM and volunteers.
A priority of the trade union movement as advised by the Trade Union Secretary was to concentrate on working girls’ education and the development of the system of one-classroom schools, which promotes this policy.

I had the opportunity to visit a number of income generating activities at first hand. These community-driven initiatives while by no means exclusively focused on women’s development and empowerment were providing skills to many women in tandem with basic literacy. This will allow them to understand the value of education for their own children. In addition, many of the skills provided were focused improving the economic prospects of women who were heads of single parent families.

An issue to be addressed and which was highlighted in discussion with the evaluation team was the unsatisfactory relationship existing with the local schools administered by the Ministry of Education. Not all head teachers had been willing to take on the additional burden of enrolling the working children. Some refused to accept children back into the formal education system because of the additional teaching requirements they see as being involved. Individual instances of problems in reintegrating children into education can probably best be tackled through a combination of local awareness campaigns and a sensitisation of senior and middle management.

The models developed in Egypt compared very favourably with the best examples seen in both Cambodia and Sri Lanka. They also reflect the denser population of children at risk. They are larger in scope: the potential in terms of numbers of children at risk reached through these programmes are comparable with the two other country programmes. However the prospects for replication and for quickly going to scale appear to be greater.

Determining the nature and extent of the worst forms of child labour is seen to be far from an exact science. Information is always patchy and often anecdotal. There is a
general recognition of the difficulties of accessing such information and of the special
skills and networking required. In all three countries there was inadequate provision
for ascertaining the level and scale of the problem.

The estimated population of working children in Egypt is of the order of three million.
It was emphasised to me that the political establishment backed by public opinion was
aware of its huge responsibilities to tackle these challenges and to combat child labour
through developing a medium-term policy framework along with short-term
strategies, clear action plans, budgets and a framework for monitoring and evaluating
progress in implementation. In Egypt there was a somewhat slow start. There was
the apprehension that information released on the level of child labour including some
of the worst forms would impact on strong vested interests. No studies had been
undertaken of children in domestic labour but it is very probable that numbers of these
children could be at risk.

Of the three countries it was my opinion that in Cambodia where the needs of children
are seen to be so great that the fight against child labour and especially its worst forms
required most support. While in Egypt and Sri Lanka the government institutions
were then in place it was noted that in Cambodia and notwithstanding some broadly
positive indications there was a huge moral need for the government to be seen to
invest more in the management, manpower and direction of its anti-child labour
campaign.

As a majority Moslem country the idea of sexual abuse could not be either
comprehended or countenanced from an ethical or religious point of view – but none
the less when young children are separated from their parents or legitimate guardians
the problem will always exist. While the scale of Worst Forms of Child Labour in
Egypt in numerical terms far surpasses those of either Sri Lanka or Cambodia, child
labour has not always been viewed negatively.
During 2014 Egypt has undergone a revolution and then an army coup. Mrs Mubarrak is long gone from the political scene. I wonder what has happened to all the programmes and plans prepared for the betterment of the working children.
Chapter XII

A short excursion to Papua New Guinea and a sense of the Stone Age: Libya and Yemen.

I had always been intrigued whenever Papua New Guinea came up in conversation. Everyone there calls it PNG. Over the years and from a professional EC standpoint I had made several submissions and submitted tenders for a work there. Always it appeared that the tender competitions were suspended or deferred for a range of unusual reasons; such as that the tender committee has been dissolved because of allegations of corruption or civil unrest or the like. Indeed, it had been put to me that in terms of a transparency scale PNG was down at the bottom, snuggling closely together with countries such as Nigeria or Pakistan.

Probably as a result the country has had to endure a crippling debt burden with some 20% of Government revenues being diverted to debt repayment with not so much to show for it. A major shortcoming under the budgetary situation I encountered there is that there is very little funding available for development and for quality improvement in relation to education goods and services. The Government has even had to turn down projects proposed for education reform and literacy by both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank because they couldn’t afford to pay back the bank credits.

Yes, the country is certainly unique. The blurb I had read before departure described PNG as a democracy which was stable and which prided itself on strength in diversity. I would certainly question the extent to which the country conforms to European concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘stability’. Some 85% of the population continues to live in rural areas and maintains a subsistence-based lifestyle. Rapid growth, especially of the urban population, is creating severe overcrowding, increase in the spread of urban crime and other attendant problems. In practice I found it to be quite the most dangerous country I had visited over a fairly extensive career.

With a population of 5.2 million it is unbelievable but there are more than 700 distinct languages spoken across the territory. The population is spread across the mainland and the four major islands of PNG with different degrees of communication and
transportation problems. Until recently in the interior the mainly Australian exploration and mining companies would discover new unheard of remote peoples living basic pastoral lives with no contact to the outside world. These communities have often been referred to as ‘Stone-Age’ peoples. It’s ironic to think of the Second World War raging around them in that part of the world and of their being oblivious to the mayhem all around them. At a local level there was a strong tradition of head-hunting. On more than one occasion it was indicated to me that in three generations some of these peoples had graduated from head-hunting pastoralists to helicopter pilots!

Given formidable natural geographic barriers coupled to diverse cultural traditions between the Pauans living along the coast and the until recently fairly primitive lifestyles of substantial parts of the population it is sadly not surprising to find there are immense frictions generated between and within these different peoples and tribes.

My PNG counterpart on the left - most probably of Papuan origin - and local project people who appear much different from a physical make-up. They were most pleasant companions.

But yes it is rich in diversity. There is very considerable ethnic, geographical and cultural diversity. The population is divided between the Pauans, to my opinion a gentle trading people and the Guineans who are found distributed in distinct isolated pockets across the interior of the islands and the small expatriate populations of mostly Australian and Indian immigrants. The spread of the main religions is quite diverse and includes Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterian/Methodist/London Missionary Society believers, Anglicans, Evangelical Alliance adherents, Seventh-day Adventists, other Protestants and indigenous believers; the latter account for 34% of the population. I’d very much like to have found out more about the practices of the indigenous believers and how they have evolved and matured and distanced themselves from head hunting and the ‘boiling pot’.
I’m sure the churches were doing a fine job but I detected a degree of paternalism and a belief that the long established clergy had a more profound understanding of local people's needs and aspirations than had the people themselves. During my short stay I met a Dublin priest who played a central role in the organisation of basic education. He would be quite satisfied with any proposed EC project but at the same time he was unrelenting in attempting to influence me and in putting forward what he saw as denominational rights and the maintenance of the existing privileges enjoyed by the different faiths.

He wasn't into transferring authority to school-based management unless it was on established traditional lines. One had the impression that the Ministry of Education might have its aspirations and that these aspirations - if they were ever to be implemented - needed to take into account the religious realities. It was familiar ground to me; more like Ireland had been when I was growing up in the 1960s.

On the other hand PNG is richly endowed with natural resources but exploitation has been hampered by the rugged terrain and the high cost of developing infrastructure. Agriculture provides a subsistence livelihood for 85% of the population. Mineral deposits, including oil, copper, and gold, account for 72% of export earnings. There are substantial illegal cross-border trade activities coming primarily from Indonesia, including ‘goods smuggling, illegal narcotics trafficking, and squatters and secessionists’.

The eastern half of the island of New Guinea the second largest island in the world was divided between Germany (north) and the UK (south) in 1885. The latter area was transferred to Australia in 1902, which occupied the northern portion during World War I and continued to administer the combined areas until independence in 1975. There is still acknowledged to be a degree of friction in relations between Australia and its former protectorate.

It is fair to say that the Australians with their almost 75 years in charge have something to answer for. Earlier in the Philippines I had come across undocumented criticism of racism on Australian funded projects. Here there were the same accusations but the practice appeared to have gone on for much longer. There were stories about the prohibition of access for local people to the most attractive beaches until quite recent times. I was genuinely shocked by the casual abuse of the local peoples by some of the diplomats/aid people I came across.

While I was there, the Australian authorities in Brisbane, I think, strip-searched the PNG Prime Minister as he entered Australia. There was huge furore in the local PNG newspapers and considerable exception was taken by the local people I spoke to - to this somewhat cavalier treatment. Australians I met just couldn't understand the basis for the locals’ negative reactions.

It was a dangerous place for expatriates. A personal friend from Barbados, John Applebee, who I looked forward to meeting had been murdered prior to my arrival: being thrown off the third floor of the local hotel in Port Moresby. From the beginning it was emphasised to me that I must take very special care and be very conscious of security issues and instructions. I was directed by the EC Delegate on pain of my mission being terminated that I should order only the scarlet coloured
taxicabs. I was to telephone in advance and to ask for the taxi registration number and
the driver's name. Before getting into the taxi I was to confirm these identities. Initially I thought this was an exceptional but as I remarked the two perimeter security
fences around the hotel and a further presence of security between the public hotel
areas and the bedrooms I duly took note and followed instructions.

Our aircraft from the outside.

Coincidently, a colleague was working on a parallel project in PNG, which
overlapped with mine. Unfortunately, and quite shortly before I arrived, she had
slipped in the bathroom in her hotel, had broken her ribs. In the course of the
identification of her injuries and her being attended by a physician her wallet with
cards and passport had been stolen.

It certainly is no place for girls to be; on their own. I noticed several times the
newspapers carried horrendous accounts of gang rapes and attacks on girls’ school
dormitories. Personally I've found the people I met warm, interested and above all
friendly and open. They have had throughout their lives had to put up with these fears,
raise their children and feed them against a background of insecurity and random
assault. I admired them very much.

Transportation across country in the absence of a road network generally is dependent
on small fixed wing aircraft, which daily fly across the difficult and often stormy
terrain. My Terms of Reference noted that “whilst key departments and stakeholders
are generally located in Port Moresby, some travel to provinces may be required. It
should be noted that no road links exist between the capital and the provincial towns,
and all internal travel outside the capital will be by air”. I suppose a picture most people have of PNG is one of beautiful islands and of being transported across them in small heroic aeroplanes which are maintained and refuelled on a variety of primitive air strips. It’s not that far from the reality but possibly doesn’t take into account all the eventualities.  

My mission team setting out for Lae to the north of Port Moresby

Through my career I suppose I have made more than 100 missions for the European Commission. The mission to PNG was distinct from the normal bureaucratic run of the mill appointments. In the first place I was approached by an EC official rather than having to apply to be considered for the appointment. I was approached by a lady to whom I had reported on numerous Pakistani and Nepalese missions. In telephoning me to enquire as to my willingness to go she said that this would be a short mission and that in highlighting my candidature she had convinced her colleagues regarding a sense of discretion which I could be expected to bring to the mission. Perhaps, in retrospect I should have been more wary.

The purpose of my mission was as an outsider to carry out a short review and revision where necessary of a proposed €39 million Feasibility Study for Education, Training and Human Resources Programme and the programme components proposed for PNG in response to quality issues raised by the relevant Brussels Directorates. These had been referred back for further consideration. The Feasibility Study in question had

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10 I was travelling seated between two female colleagues in this plane. Unfortunately we had to travel through a storm and the aircraft pitched and bucked in all directions. We were all terrified but my arms wore the bruises of the ladies grasps as we plunged with them screaming hither and thither.
cost of the order of €500,000, a very substantial sum and had taken some six months to complete.

Anyway, I came, I asked a number of questions and I visited a limited number of important locations. I met the vested interest groups, from the Ministry, the donor stakeholders especially the Australians, and the representatives of the various churches. In the short time available, I prepared a fairly trenchant report, which I'm still proud of. I've never been paid for the exercise because of the fundamental disagreement which developed between me and the Delegation on what the priorities for a project of that magnitude might or should be.

Glancing through my computer project files I see I was to start in March 2005 with a draft Final Report submitted by Day 25 (calendar days) after the commencement of the mission. The task established for me was tight and was summarised as:

2 days: Mission to Brussels for briefing;
2 days: Travelling to PNG;
2 days: Inception meetings with National Department of Education, NAO, EC-Delegation, other stakeholders in Port Moresby;
12 days: Interviews; Stakeholder debriefing on day twelve;
2 days: Travel back to Europe;
5 days: Drafting of a Financing Proposal and the mission report.

“On arrival in Port Moresby, the expert will be thoroughly familiar with the 9th EDF Feasibility Study for the Education, Training and Human Resources Development Programme, the draft Financing Proposal, the views of AIDCO/C and will:

- Review with the key departments and stakeholders the TOR and Plan of Work;
Agree on the methodology of the review, in terms of the level of participation vis-à-vis management of the process, data collection, data analysis, drawing conclusions/ supplying recommendations and giving reactions to draft conclusions. “

The short duration of the itinerary and the briefing, the requirement for gathering feedback and the preparation of a Financing Proposal and a mission report including international and local travel with accompanying jetlag was totally unrealistic and I should have known it. I confess on the other hand having heard so much about PNG I was anxious to capitalise on the opportunity of a short mission.

From the beginning when I read the TORs for the mission I had concerns about the effectiveness of the study for an earlier EC funded education project prepared several years previously and as to its relevance. At the initial briefing in Brussels the notes I took focused on the fact that the original Financing Proposal had not been accepted by Brussels and hence my mission. Another issue was that there were serious doubts expressed on whether an amount of €39 million earmarked in the financial envelope could be absorbed and/or and given the reputation for absence of transparency - adequately accounted for over the project period.

On the other hand, I encountered valid and trenchant criticisms from local PNG officials of the “patchwork” nature of projects like the one proposed; the absence of cohesion; the fact that adjoining projects took different approaches, the need for a unified policy perspective and the like. One planning officer criticized the negative results experienced in a recent project providing textbooks – and for which I recollect
€ 10 million had been allocated – and wasted. I was truly amazed when I read in one of the Feasibility Study Annexes to the project that the World Bank project had experienced serious issues of corruption regarding textbooks and withdrawn from funding it. How then could the Formulation Study incorporate such a proposal?

Madang: Inter-island local travel.

I worked all hours and in the time available outlined a radical departure from the Feasibility Study and proposed instead that EC funding should support the technical and vocational education sub-sector as the second top priority in the PNG’s own National Education Plan. I further suggested EC support would also fund the cross-cutting areas of activities contributing to containment of HIV/AIDS and for implementation of the Gender Equity in Education Policy of the National Department of Education. I considered the alternative proposal I prepared offered the opportunity for the EC through its support to have an influence on policy development for the whole TVET sub-sector. I felt this would be an improvement on the present situation where all aspects of formal education are dominated by AusAID. From such feedback as I had this alternative approach would have been broadly acceptable to AusAid.

This was a battle I fought long ago. I just give a flavour of the arguments put forward. My criticisms and advocacy of an alternative approach wasn’t very much welcomed by a Delegation which I’m sure had planned for and expected a rubber-stamping exercise of the earlier proposal. They were instead left with a professional report which explicitly criticised the earlier proposal. It meant they would have to go back and explain themselves and further justify their decision to Brussels. While I could sympathise with their dilemma I was firmly convinced that the radical alternative I was proposing was along the right lines.
This was one of the instances over a long career when my professional conviction stood up to the pressure of the client institutions. I like to think that on occasion I did stand on principle when I hear consultants being criticised as mere scribes who propose what the client wants to do anyway. The Delegation refused to reimburse me my fees. They did pay my travel and subsistence costs.

Ironically and later by another coincidence an EC official with whom I had worked extensively in Cambodia was appointed as the new Delegate to PNG. He requested I should go out and evaluate the project then under implementation. I still feel my course of action in politely declining his kind invitation was the correct one.

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**Yemen**

Yemen is one of the oldest centres of civilization in the Near East. It occupies the southwestern to southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the only state in the Arabian Peninsula to have a purely republican form of government. Yemen was the first country in the peninsula to grant women the right to vote\(^\text{11}\). Yemeni unification took place as recently as 22 May 1990, when North Yemen was united with South Yemen forming the Republic of Yemen. The majority of Yemen's population live in rural or tribal areas, and it is one of the least developed countries in the world. Throughout its modern history the country has undergone a long period of conflicts and civil wars, the last being the 2011 Yemeni uprising.

I went to Yemen late in 2005. Initially, I had some hesitation in going on a mission there. Earlier there had been very bitter civil war between North Yemen and South Yemen. I had heard many stories concerning the Al Qaeda rebels operating in the country. Osama bin Laden’s vast extended family originates in Yemen and there are still considerable numbers of the family resident there. On my arrival, and notwithstanding the ban on alcohol and other bans such as the ban on women entering into selected coffee shops I came to respect some certainly not all of these all-Arab traditions and to enjoy my time in that wonderful world heritage city of Sana’a. Any hesitations I had were soon forgotten.

I was down in Yemen for a couple of weeks to work on the preparation of a national workshop entitled “Towards the development of a Medium Term Results Framework for Basic Education”. The workshop highlighted the need to take a hard look at the basic education system and to see where change and flexibility might be introduced in line with implementing the modernisation agenda set out under the Government’s Basic Education Development Strategy.

The workshop which was sponsored by GTZ the German Development Agency and our paymasters, took place in the National Public Administration Centre in Sana’a from December 4th to 8th, 2005. I made a short visit again when I was based in Cairo to make a presentation on our capacity as a consulting firm to the World Bank.

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\(^\text{11}\) Wikipedia
The modernisation process underway in Yemen is aimed to address the high rate of population growth forecast, the very high illiteracy and the very low enrolment rates, especially of females residing in rural areas. Reforms are coupled to the high proportion of out-of-school children. Current and forecast GDP growth levels were pegged around the expected levels of population increase but the expectation even then was that the government would find it difficult to respond significantly to the social demands of a rapidly expanding population.

All developing countries face considerable challenges of poverty. Women in them experience deeper levels of poverty; tending to be confined to domestic and subsistence roles and experiencing heavy and increasing workloads. A recent study\textsuperscript{12} notes that Yemen has the starkest gender disparities (among the highest in the world) in terms of enrolment ratios, adult literacy rates and primary completion rates.

Girls’ education was seen in the context of a medium-term strategy to reduce population increase. I admit I found this to be somewhat ironic in a traditionalist Arab country. It was also acknowledged in assessing the need for increased girls’ enrolment that cognisance has to be taken of Yemen’s current situation especially in relation to the idea of women at work or the concept of girls’ education generally.

I was quite taken aback by the then current awful situation in relation to key demographic and economic indicators which were being targeted by the modernisation process. Main issues were the high rate of population growth forecast and its expected impact on the already low levels of service supply, very high illiteracy and the very low enrolment rates, especially of females residing in rural areas and the high proportion of out-of-school children.

\textsuperscript{12}Integrating Gender into EFA Fast Track Initiative Processes and National Education Plans: A study by Amanda Seel and David Clarke: (Final Draft) June 2005
The situation in 2004 was that there was a shortage of female teachers in rural areas and measures to increase girls’ enrolment would have to address this issue. There was a need to consider the high student/teacher ratios and the need for teacher re-deployment if adequate internal efficiencies were to be achieved.

The then current forecast of population growth was expected to be in excess of 50%, by 2021. This was just another instance of enormous population growth taking place in countries of the developing world. A serious implication of the current high levels of growth was the heavy pressure it exerts on the limited resources of the nation to provide adequate social services including basic education services; even for maintaining existing levels of service. Later these levels of population increase have to have consequences for the Western World with its aging population and need for youthful workers. There appears to be the inevitability of a collision course between our reducing Western population growth rates and the impact of young immigrant populations from burgeoning countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan or Yemen.

In recommending activities to be undertaken by the Ministry that aimed to increase enrolment of girls there were a limited number of key areas where progress in drawing up and consolidating the planning process was required. These activities would be tied to the initiation of pilot projects aimed at achieving modest increases over larger areas of a district and the evaluation of results before a decision was reached on going to a greater scale of effort. The idea was that initially and starting from a low baseline to adopt strategies to encourage the government to build up capacity in pace with the ability of the system to improve.

In a very traditionalist society the government was somewhat jittery at the risk of going forward too fast. At the same time with the current levels of population
increase it knew it had few other options. I would like to think that if I were to revisit the country that there would be some improvement on these basic indicators. I hope so but based on the government responses I have to fear any progress made may well be both small and slow.

On arriving at the Ministry initially I was introduced to a young intense but fairly withdrawn official. Over the course of the workshop I noticed he let everyone have their say. He hardly interfered. In contrast on the last day he reviewed the proceedings. He was critical of some points I had made which was fair. Then he summarised the impact of the workshop findings on the ongoing government policy. Everyone was quiet and listened intently to what he said. He then thanked me and left. I suddenly knew where the power lay.

My old diplomatic friend from Pakistan and Vietnam was based in the Netherlands Embassy with responsibility on behalf of the donor organisations for education reforms. I therefore knew I had a friend and this was of great benefit. One evening she kindly invited my Dutch associate and me to her residence. We had a wonderful evening talking about old times and sharing a glass or two of wine together.

I think that my professional Dutch colleague was often uneasy as a young Western woman because of the prohibitions on ladies which must have been both unexpected, as well as intimidating. I found myself as an old man being implored on occasion by her to accompany her to places of interest or just for mundane things such as changing money in an ATM machine.
On another occasion my friend asked me for a favour. Her private secretary, a lady with a Ph.D. from the UK whose brother was a senior member of the opposition party had arranged a meeting between my friend the Dutch diplomat, the brother and his political colleagues. It would be for unheard of for a lady - even a Western lady - to be unaccompanied by a man for such a meeting. My friend as a diplomat representing the Dutch Government was very anxious to learn the opinions first-hand of the opposition parties on issues such as to the rights of girls to access education or their views on Osama bin Ladin and Al Qaeda and the like. We were accompanied to the meeting by the private secretary who was unrecognisable at least to me; being totally covered from head to toe.

She just observed and never said a word even to her own brother. We met in a remote area outside Sana’a where we were received with great courtesy. On behalf of the three of us are I was asked to introduce the group and to indicate the purpose of our meeting. The questions were addressed to me and not to the ladies and all of the conversations where either briefings from my friend the diplomat to me which I then relayed to the politicians or the other way around. So as an outsider I was privy to a most memorable exchange which spanned the cultures of East and West.

We were offered several cups of tea, and in the course of a somewhat laid-back discussion we were assured by the opposition politicians that they had no sympathy or whatever with terrorism. They emphasised they were quite prepared to work with the government to ensure that the Al Qaeda movement would be suppressed and its members imprisoned. They were anxious that this message should be shared with the diplomatic community and be made known internationally. On the conclusion of the meeting we were cordially escorted back to our vehicle and allowed to depart. My two lady companions were very excited by the range of topics discussed, and I was glad to have been of some small assistance.
Another of my friend’s development colleagues, a Pakistani lady from the World Bank, railed against the combined efforts of the World Bank, the European Union and the Asian Development Bank in introducing earlier reforms to Pakistani education. In a small world I had earlier been personally involved in this work. I made a spirited defence of the donors’ efforts which might have been more effective had the federal and provincial governments been more co-operative and less corrupt. The lady had that fruity ‘convent’ accent which identified her as being well-educated and related to some or other Pakistani feudal family. This would have explained her down-right right wing attitudes. In my travels I met several Pakistani ladies with similar backgrounds and dispositions working for one or other of the international agencies. Yes, it’s a small world sometimes.

I think it's useful and a little amusing at this stage of introduction to highlight some interesting differences in culinary tastes between life in Yemen and the West. Overall, either in hotels or in supermarkets there wasn't a great deal of selection, especially of food and somewhat poor, if any, access to other than fairly primitive foods such as bread and eggs. I used to check with my Ethiopian waiter in the hotel each morning. Very graciously he would approach me and ask what were my wishes for breakfast? I would reply that I should like something awkward such as chicken and some fish. He would nod his head solemnly and then giggle and say with great regret “Sir, today like yesterday and tomorrow - it must be eggs. Will it be hard-boiled or omelette?” I confess I enjoyed this little dialogue - even at the expense of variety.

Yemen is famous for its use of the drug Kat. Almost everyone is addicted to this weed, which was first brought over from Ethiopia. There the shepherds noticed that the sheep became high when they grazed on it. They soon identified markets for it and since about the 14th century Kat is everywhere used in Yemen. Huge areas of agricultural land are needed to grow the drug crop. Work stops everywhere in the cities at two in the afternoon and then especially the men can be seen going off home with their packets of weed in plastic bags. It is not restricted to men. You'll see children chewing it. Women are said to use it together and separately from the men. On top of many of the prestigious residences and buildings you will see a room which is open to the four sides and this is where the prominent men and their colleagues will sit together and talk and talk and chew the drug.

Work will normally re-commences late in the afternoon or early evening between say six and seven. Once I sat beside a government minister tasked with inviting investment into Yemen and who despaired at the image that Yemen had throughout the Arab world and amongst its own expatriate populations for the very high levels of inactivity and non-productivity due to the all-pervasive habit of chewing Kat. I was advised it is a cause of great domestic unhappiness. Men will spend a significant proportion of their wages to ensure a steady supply of the drug.

On the other hand I enjoyed working with the elder-statesman of the mission, a German expert. I was impressed one afternoon when I suggested we should meet to have a discussion on a particular issue. He agreed the issue was important but at the same time insisted there was no way his personal siesta was going to be interrupted for work. He obviously had adapted well to his surroundings and traditions.
I’d like now to say a few words about Sana’a, the ancient historical capital of Yemen. The city unfortunately is off most tourist itineraries. It is situated on a plateau at over 2,500 metres above sea level. The great plus of its location is that being at such a height you have a temperature throughout the year which rarely, if ever, exceeds 30C. It’s one of the oldest cities in the world. The old fortified city of Sana’a has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years, and contains a wealth of intact architectural gems. It was declared a World Heritage City by the United Nations in 1986.

While I was there I could see efforts are underway to preserve some of the oldest buildings, several of which are over 400 years old. Surrounded by ancient clay walls which stand 6–9 metres (20–30 ft) high, the old city is said to contain over 100 mosques, 12 hammams (baths) and 6,500 houses. Many of the houses resemble ancient skyscrapers; reaching several stories high and topped with flat roofs. They are decorated with elaborate friezes and intricately carved frames and stained glass windows. They reminded me to those who know it of the fortified town houses in Dalkey, County Dublin, but were much higher and on a grander scale.

I stayed in one such which has been converted into a guesthouse. At each floor there was a courtyard with bushes and foliage to blot out the sun. None of the floors were level all through. There were lots of up and down stairs even on the same level. There were no lifts but it had a huge atmosphere.

One of the most popular attractions is Suq al-Milh (Salt Market), where it is possible to buy not only salt but bread, spices, raisins, cotton, copper, pottery, silverware, antiques (both fake and real) and, formerly, slaves. The majestic seventh century Jami’ al-Kabir (Great Mosque) is one of the oldest in the Muslim world. The Bāb al-
Yaman (Yemen Gate) is an iconicized entry point through the city walls and is said to be over 700 years old. I walked along the old narrow streets with high houses on each side and giving way to the locals passing astride their donkeys. My Dutch colleague and I were offered chai in an open courtyard by the tea merchant serving behind his brazier and we were duly inspected by all the tea drinkers. We received smiles and in no way were we interfered with.

In 2007 as noted earlier I again visited Sana’a at the invitation of the World Bank to make a preliminary presentation in relation to a future project. There was great confusion. I was introduced as the project architect proposed. I certainly wasn’t. However that didn’t stop me make an ad lib presentation on school designs and answering questions. I was received kindly. Several in the audience recognised me from the previous workshop. An Egyptian friend did a great job improvising and translating. Afterwards, we laughed a lot about it. I was also conscious that we had rescued that Pakistani World Bank lady from a serious loss of face had we not been able to think and speak so glibly on our feet.

I would have no hesitation in going back to Sana’a. In the lower altitudes of the country climate would be important. But overall in recent years the situation in these regions has become much less politically stable.\footnote{As I write these lines I’m reminded of my late mother who so often complained “Liam, why do you always have to go to places where there’s trouble.” May she rest in peace.}
Since writing these lines Yemen and Sana’a in particular has been involved in the mass demonstrations seeking greater democracy which has been a feature of the ‘Arab Spring’ during early 2011 and which has impacted spontaneously on so many conservative Arab nations.

Yemen has a long way to go before life there can equate with Western concepts of egalitarianism. But I hope that having made its sacrifices in the blood of its people and the departure of its traditional autocratic president and his ilk a better life may come to this beautiful but impoverished nation and its wonderful people.

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**Pre-revolution Libya**

The State of Libya is a country in the Maghreb region of North Africa bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Egypt to the east, Sudan to the southeast, Chad and Niger to the south, and Algeria and Tunisia to the west. The three traditional parts of the country are Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica. With an area of almost 1.8 million square km (700,000 sq mi), Libya is the 17th largest country in the world.

The largest city and capital, Tripoli, is home to 1.7 million of Libya's 6.4 million people. In 2009 Libya had the highest HDI in Africa and the fifth highest GDP (PPP) per capita in Africa. Libya has the 10th-largest proven oil reserves of any country in
the world and the 17th-highest petroleum production. This it might be suggested explains much of its recent turbulent history\textsuperscript{14}.

A civil war and NATO-led military intervention in 2011 a couple of years after my visit resulted in the ousting and death of the country's former leader, Muammar Gaddafi, and the collapse of his 42-year "First of September 'Al Fateh' Revolution" and 34-year-old Jamahiriya state. As a result, the country is currently undergoing political reconstruction. Current reports (2014) indicate a degree of mayhem across the country as various warlords fight it out amongst themselves - under the eyes of the highly interested and most definitely behind-the-scenes involvement of elements of the international oil industry.

For the last decades of the past century Libya had been a country ostracised in the West. Memories were still fresh in relation to the Lockerbie bombing of a passenger plane. Sometime ago under President Clinton, the United States bombed Col Ghaddafi’s residence in Tripoli. But Libya continues to have immense reserves of oil. This I would suppose allows Western criticisms and associated memories to lapse.

About a decade ago things appeared different. Col. Ghadaffi was successful in repairing the shortcomings which had led Libya to be on the list of international outcasts. Two saboteurs were duly delivered to the International Court at The Hague and stood trial for the bombing. Ghadaffi gave up all nuclear materials he had used to make his bombs along with a list of those who had provided them especially Dr. Khan, whose house I had often passed when I lived in Islamabad. They passed over details of their IRA contacts they had supplied with explosives. But gradually, over the intervening time Col. Ghadaffi and his regime were seen to have moved closer to dialogue and some form of rehabilitation with the West\textsuperscript{15}.

Libya is an immense country and strategically located between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa\textsuperscript{16}. In late 2006 and early 2007 I went on two missions to Tripoli. We had been approached by an equipment supplier, who was implementing a multi-million euro provision of training equipment to the Ministry of Labour there. He had seen that in order to expand his contracts it would be advantageous for him to propose a team of experts to examine the situation and to report to the Ministry on possible reforms relating to its eighty eight training institutions.

\textsuperscript{14} Again Wickipedia

\textsuperscript{15} This attempt at reapproachment with the West came to an end with the turmoil of the Arab Spring. In August 2011 Tripoli was liberated by the rebels and Colonel Ghaddafi’s 42 years of dictatorship came to an end. During 2011 I followed the Libyan War with fascination coupled with sadness. So many of the towns we visited have undergone siege and counter siege with a huge loss of life.

\textsuperscript{16} With reference to the map below: the mission concentrated on a small part of the North-West and was based in Tripoli. We travelled west to the vicinity of Zuwarah, close to the Tunisian border; east to Misratha and south into the mountain areas.
Then the Western-imposed sanctions had been largely lifted and Western and Chinese petroleum firms vied with each other for a local oil contracts off the Libyan coast. The Libyans have developed considerable expertise in playing these groups off each other and in extracting substantial concessions. This has all changed. In 2011 the country was the target of a Western NATO-backed social and political revolution which ousted the entrenched Ghaddafi clan and its hangers on. In this it had been just one other Arab country affected by the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011.

The entrepreneur himself was a most unusual individual, with only a small formal education but with a clear eye for where the deals were to be done. In a few short years he had expanded his firm and business to be involved in a number of developing countries. Of Indonesian origin, he had charm along with a capacity to move easily in any form of company. As well as us he had managed to involve the Dutch National Training Organisation, and the Dutch National Curriculum Development Organisation; both of which report to the Dutch Government17. I was both curious and interested and I suppose flattered to be invited to join the consortium as team leader.

As I and my colleagues sat together in the passenger area of Rome Airport on the journey out the first time we debated whether we should risk buying some duty-free liquor to bring in with us and whether we should have a meal before boarding the Alitalia plane for Tripoli. We bought the liquor which was subsequently confiscated by the Libyan authorities without a comment. Instead of an expected meal on the flight we were somewhat dismayed and a little confused to be presented with an Italian ice cream cone!

I found Libya to be something of a paradox. It's a Mediterranean country and in addition to a hot climate shares characteristics with southern Italy or Greece. People come out to talk and to parade along the seafront promenade in the evenings with their children. Very few of any of the women seen around Tripoli wore the burca or were covered up but that changed as we journeyed into the interior. On the other hand, we were booked in to a central hotel. Immediately on arrival we were instructed to leave as the rooms had been transferred on short notice to the President of the Philippines.

17 This wasn’t altogether by chance. The Dutch Government had just signed a long-term agreement on energy security with the Libyans.
and her entourage. It was just one of several examples I found as being outside of the usual norms of hospitality encountered elsewhere. In contrast I found the people I met to be warm and interesting especially away from the Ministry officials and the political hierarchy.

Somewhere, I’m not sure where, I was in discussion with a native of one of these oil producing countries. I always recall the emphatic way he spoke of oil as not being a blessing but rather of constituting a curse to any country and its prospects for equitable development. I think this is especially true of Libya. It is ruled by clever men but by men who appear to have a small sense of ‘community’ or ‘nation’ – or indeed morality. I sorely hope that the new Libya can lay down the basis for sustainable and equitable development following the recent revolution and before the oil runs out.

I was surprised to learn that the Ghaddafi government had forced wage levels down even though Libya had a thriving, oil-based economy. The reason for doing this according to several Libyans I spoke to was to enable him to be in a position to finance his macro-political ambitions where he aspired to become the first President of a United States of Africa.

At the same time it was very obvious that Libya was governed as a one-party state. Many people appeared to be appointed well above their capacities. Others carried an authority out of scale to the services provided. I found it strange when reporting to the Ministry that I was required to report to several separate factions who sometimes appeared to be in competition with each other. One faction was headed by the Minister and his backers; the other was headed by the Secretary-General of the Ministry and his backers. Both of these factions were certainly on the take. To impress us with the respective levels of their authority they each allowed us the opportunity to see some but only a very limited number; nine out of the eighty eight institutions they proposed to reform.

The Secretary-General, independently of the mission and its travelling arrangements had called down his brother from Antwerp to be with us as a facilitator/manager. Incidentally, this man did put his hand in his pocket and took us out for expensive meals. But between them they placed restrictions on where and when we could travel. It was a little strange given that they had sought professional advice on institution development and the team having arrived they put fairly substantial constraints in our way.

The situation regarding prevalence of low wages was not to say that the population I encountered was impoverished. Quite on the contrary I was given to understand that the unemployed population could either: (a) draw an unemployed allowance from the Government; (b) borrow from the Government to start up his/her own business – the amount borrowed will depend on the indicative business plan; and, (c) They can present themselves for training. The unemployed are offered places on short training courses. However the unemployed must first be registered with the Ministry of Manpower in Tripoli. This is done through the local People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Afterwards, Tripoli assigns them to particular institutions.
The UN Index, which ranks standard of living, social security, health care and other factors for development, sees Libya at the top of all the African countries. Libya boasts the lowest rate of illiteracy in the Arab world. The UN found the Plans unveiled by the Government to be impressive. These included developing ICT in Libya as a technological hub. The Plans placed a heavy emphasis on educational and TVET development.

However there was still a huge dependence on imported skilled foreign labour, mainly from other Arab countries. Whilst there is a qualified workforce - Libyans with degrees - there is little or no indigenous skilled labour force. Despite the high literacy levels and enrolment ratios the Libyan education system is not providing the skills required to drive the economy forward. The lack of well qualified and trained teachers equipped with the necessary technical and IT skills required for building a generation of students qualified with the competitive tools of the 21st century is hindering development. In addition to that and as already noted, there was a great deal of apathy among teachers due to their low salaries.

English has now been officially declared the second language of Libya. Demand for English language is high and increasing. Indeed all the institutes visited placed a high emphasis on foreign language learning. All were equipped with learning laboratories - at least two per institute – and these provide language support for all students taking in-centre courses. Whilst the oil and gas sector had were said to have made the most progress in this form of training it still had a long way to go. With a steady growth in the importance of other sectors such as tourism, construction and telecommunications and more interest shown from the outside world there should have been a considerable need for basic training related to these emerging markets. Integration into the global economy and a new approach to engaging with the West irrespective of who rules the country means that Libya has to greatly improve its educational and TVET systems.

In 2004, the total number of students distributed over 345 intermediate vocational schools was 59,318. These we learned were taught and trained by 10,030 teachers or on a ratio of about 6:1 which has to be unsustainable. Moreover, the challenges of
poor infrastructure in remoter areas and lack of skilled and IT equipped teachers is a great impediment to the reform process.

*There were of the order of 860,000 civil servants employed by the state to serve a population of approximately 5.6 million people. Again this doesn’t seem to be sustainable.* The impression I had was one of a government dependent on its oil revenues and under pressure to provide occupations and work for its citizens. It certainly had a high proportion of civil servants in comparison with developed countries. Then the population includes 1.7 million students, over 270,000 of whom study at the tertiary level. In the academic year 1975/76 the number of university students was estimated to be 13,418. Today, this number has increased to more than 200,000, with an extra 70,000 enrolled in the higher technical and vocational sector. The rapid increase in the number of students in the higher education sector has been mirrored by an increase in the number of institutions of higher education.

The regime can be ambitious as well as somewhat impulsive and autocratic. In March 2000, the General People’s Committee for Education and Vocational Training was dissolved and all of its responsibilities transferred to the regional people’s committees of the 32 Shbiat (municipalities). Under a Government re-organisation responsibility for the management of Intermediate Training Centres was transferred from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Manpower some three years before my mission. With a total of 372 Intermediate Training Centres to be absorbed along-side the existing 84 Higher Institutes belonging to the Ministry of Manpower the challenge as might be imagined had been and continued to be substantial. There remained very important issues regarding finalisation of operational budget allocations, reporting lines and a satisfactory integration of the role of the Intermediate Centres with those of the Higher Institutes.

Concerning Colonel Ghadaffi himself I was told by Libyan counterparts with a certain mixture of admiration of two issues which exemplified his approach to politics. The first concerned an attractive Italian-designed Roman Catholic Church in the older part of Tripoli. The Colonel - and I suppose the local Muslim congregation - felt that this would make a considerable addition when converted to a mosque. The smaller catholic population in Tripoli was invited to give their comment but they decided not to oppose the government line. However and at the risk of inviting international publicity the Colonel decided to approach the church authorities in Rome. He made a proposal stating he would be very happy that the Roman Catholic Church should continue to retain its present, elegant church in Tripoli, but in return he felt that the Catholic authorities in Rome for their part could facilitate him in return by providing a similar elegant, ancient structure for the Moslem community to worship in; somewhere in central Rome. The church authorities in Rome never made a response.

The Colonel had not always been so supportive of the Moslem Umma or international community. My friend in Cairo took considerable exception to the statement made by him when he said he was African before he was Muslim. But then he had always considered Libya to be something of a basket case.

The other example was the fall-out he had with his prime minister over land the latter had chosen to develop privately in central Tripoli. Again, it was an elegant, centrally situated building. After several cabinet meetings when it had come up on the agenda
and the Prime Minister was absent the Colonel insisted on a discussion with him. The Prime Minister apparently knowing the mind of the Colonel put off these discussions. Thursday evening was when the Colonel came to make his most pertinent decisions. The Prime Minister wasn't in attendance. On the Friday morning following the bulldozers appeared and levelled the complete site. One way to get things done!

**The ‘supply-driven’ TVET establishment**

It was my opinion that the TVET establishment was somewhat insulated and broadly unresponsive to market forces. For the short-term this was through adopting a ‘no problems’ and a paternalistic attitude based on the ability of the oil-rich state to absorb the graduates from the system. It was clear that the Ministry was investing substantially in its three-year Higher Diploma courses from which many graduates progress to study abroad for further qualifications.

The management team in a progressive institution visited. I was amazed by the emphasis given to the production of models of buildings – especially mosques. I couldn’t see the income generation opportunities coming from it as a training activity. Note the ubiquitous Colonel’s picture in the background.

I had a question as to whether the large numbers graduating could always be accommodated in government jobs and whether either the government service or the private sector requires a graduate trainee to have achieved an education profile accompanied by high expectations - coupled with the level of skills and attitudes acquired and the very high cost expended in achieving such outcomes?

We were surprised in terms of the balance between the public and private sectors. The *public sector accounts for 95% of economic activity.* This includes the petroleum and gas sector (85%), telecommunications (5%) and electrical utilities (5%). The private sector accounts for the remaining 5%. A major proportion of training providers in Libya serve the oil and gas sector. This sector is far more advanced than other sectors and has the funds to finance education, training and equipment.
Some 3,000 students go overseas each year on scholarships. *I suppose such dominance by the public sector leaves everyone beholding to the government and its institutions to a greater or lesser degree. Big Brother was certainly seen to be everywhere.*

**Our feasibility study**

All institutes/centres covered by the mission were within a two hundred and fifty kilometre radius of the city of Tripoli. The mission was advised that the current pre-feasibility study programme being undertaken by us as the Dutch Consortium for Vocational Education and Training Improvement (DCVI) was the first of its kind to be undertaken. I thought I could see why.

The mission as noted was faced with a number of bureaucratic and logistical obstacles. There had been no pre-planning. Sometimes due to administrative reasons of whatever nature including the issue of visas for the team, coupled with logistics problems posed by the distances to be covered – most of the visits organised could not take place. Thus although it was to report on a reform process covering eighty four institutions the mission only visited nine institutes in toto; seven of which were Higher Institutes; one was a Higher Training of Trainers Institute and one was an Intermediate Institute.

In interviews with higher institute management and in walking through the lecture and workshop areas the mission was informed that a number of the institutes had received expensive new equipment for computerised courses, megatronics workshops and even for air-conditioning and electrical courses. Management understood that further equipment would also be supplied from the central ministry. The mission saw a substantial amount of equipment unused and under wraps in the relevant workshops. It was admitted to be a problem that no training on this equipment was provided to the relevant instructors. It was pointed out strenuously to the mission that it made no sense to have this valuable equipment in place without any training being provided on it. But no one appeared to be prepared to take this waste of resources up with the central administration. I think I understood the reason for this.

It is axiomatic that it will not be possible given the limited resources in terms of expert qualifications and experience to provide a uniform level of training across the board in all districts of the country. No country can afford this. Some requirements such as those for construction skills will have priority across all or almost all the regions of the country. Regional priorities can be expected to differ as between the availability of courses and the level of specialisation. A huge programme of retraining for instructors from the various institutions especially the Intermediate Centres would be required. The concept of short courses would be new to many of the Higher Institutions although the mission witnessed short course provision in several institutions visited.

The present system might be characterised as ‘top/down’ and quite rigid allowing almost no flexibility at the local level to match the needs of the labour market. Western European experience counsels otherwise and does allow for a reasonable flexibility to focus on local needs while at the same time adhering to a national training syllabus. The UNDP Report of April 2005 notes that decentralization and
support to local governance have been identified as a development priority by the national authorities and UNDP in Libya.

Patricia and I with the staff of an Intermediate Training Centre. The taller man (second left) declined to be introduced as he was an illegal immigrant and feared deportation.

There was reference made to substantial over-staffing at some locations. We recommended that a census be made of all staff employed in institutes and centres throughout the system. From such data it would be possible to establish norms based on the staffing skills especially of the more efficient institutions and to have the information crosschecked with salaries paid out by the financial administration.

Since the period of ostracisation and embargos by the West I was the first Westerner with an international TVET background that the staff of the local centres had met. They were so open and anxious to discuss new developments and the constraints they were working through. I feared that decisions on provision of equipment and associated kickbacks to the central officials in Tripoli would take precedence over what was really needed at the expense of good planning, labour market research and curriculum development and could well cost the country dear in unnecessary expenditures.

I liked most of the people I encountered. I was most impressed when on one occasion the mayor of one of the municipalities invited us to his home and personally served us at his table. The exceptions were the officials at the most senior levels who were intent on carving out resources for themselves and their families and backers. In Pakistan I had earlier learnt some of the tricks relating to the supply of training equipment - so Libya and the operations of these cliques were not new to me.
I wrote an honest report and have heard nothing officially since. The conclusions and recommendations of the report I prepared were based on the discussions with the Directors and staff of the Higher Institutes covered by its itinerary. There had been considerable frustration that all decisions down to minutiae were taken at the central Ministry in Tripoli and didn’t relate to the reality on the ground – especially the migration of internal populations from the interior to the more prosperous towns on the coast and for the crucial need for work related short courses in training. I alluded to this. In parallel and at the same time I was aware of the entrepreneur and his negotiations which ultimately became bogged down in the sand. There were two factions and even he couldn’t meet both their exorbitant demands.

There are many ancient sites to be found across Libya and treks into the amazing interior. I regret I missed an opportunity to visit Leptis Magna one of several wonderfully preserved towns of the Roman era. Maybe there will be another time and opportunity.
Chapter XIII

Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts

I have had exposure of one kind or another to nearly all the countries of South Asia so I thought it was high time that I took the opportunity to visit Bangladesh when it came on offer - so to speak – out of the blue in November and December 2008. I recollect that in working in Bangladesh I’ve been involved in two very distinct projects; the first chronologically was the EC/UNDP project located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts; the second was an EC funded review of secondary education based in the Ministry of Education in the capital, Dhakka.

Bangladesh is located on the fertile Bengal delta. It is bordered by the Republic of India to its north, west and east, by the Union of Myanmar (Burma) to its south-east and by the Bay of Bengal to its south. It is separated from the Democratic Republic of Nepal and the Kingdom of Bhutan by the narrow Indian Siliguri Corridor. Together with the neighboring Indian state of West Bengal it makes up the ethno-linguistic region of Bengal. The borders of modern Bangladesh took shape during the Partition of Bengal and British India in 1947, when the region became the eastern wing of the newly formed state of Pakistan.

Following years of political exclusion, ethnic and linguistic discrimination, and economic neglect by the politically dominant Western Pakistani wing a surge of popular agitation, nationalism and civil disobedience led in 1971 to the Bangladesh Liberation War resulting in the separation of the region from Pakistan and the formation of an independent Bangladesh. After independence, the new state proclaimed a secular multiparty democracy. The country then endured decades of poverty, famine, political turmoil and numerous military coups. The Bengalis form the country's predominant ethnic group whereas the indigenous peoples in northern and southeastern districts form a significant and diverse ethnic minority. The Bengal delta region has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The four largest religions in the country are Islam (89%), Hinduism (9%), Buddhism (1%) and Christianity (0.5%) 18.

In participating on these two projects I came to learn of the often terrible poverty conditions under which the Bengali majority are forced to live. Sadly, I also became aware of the even worse conditions of the ethnically very different peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I commence my tale chronologically with the mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts or the CHT as they are almost universally known.

18 Wikipedia
I flew to Skiphol - Amsterdam Airport where I was joined by my long-term Dutch working colleague. We flew Amsterdam to Delhi and overnighted in a dreadful hotel which had been suggested by the tourist agency who had booked our flights. When my colleague blows – she blows. We had to make an early connection for Dhaka. I was afraid that with the pressure she was generating that we would have the police and all Hell breaking around us. To extricate us required my pouring of much oil on those troubled waters.

Later, as we flew down to Dhaka we could clearly see to the north-east the Himalayan mountain plateau. It surprised us that Kathmandu is only an hour's flight time from
Dhaka. This helped to explain how it was possible for us to meet several of our Nepal colleagues and old friends again in Dhaka. One of these was the man who had helped to organise my flight out of Nepal when my sister died.

Once more with the good old UN – like old times – and not much more comfortable.
Standing with me is my friend and local Bangladeshi counterpart team member.

The Bengali people are amongst the most interesting of the South Indian people whom it was my good fortune to meet. Devout Muslims they are also liberal. I am aware that with writers like Tagore they have a long and honourable literary culture. There is dynamism about them. Indeed under the Raj when Calcutta was the capital of Bengal and before it was ceded to India at partition there was a well-known saying ‘What Calcutta thinks today – India will do tomorrow’.

Sadly, today Bangladesh is a very poor country much put upon by natural disasters. I was surprised when the people I met were not always so concerned about the well-known and disastrous tidal waves and tsunamis funnelling up the Bay of Bengal. This was because these calamities only struck a particular region every so often – maybe every fifty years. Their impacts were spread widely along the coast. Some areas could escape inundation for up to a century. No, their main problem was the impact of the mighty rivers crossing the country which are so prone to changing course along the low lying interior. The impact of such mighty meanderings on the riverine communities is calamitous and is continuing. These communities are seen to be the poorest of the poor. To alleviate their suffering governments ever since partition have adopted the practice of transferring them and ‘planting’ them – but at tremendous social cost - in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world! The country is twice the size of Ireland and supports a population of one hundred and fifty million. On a later mission a colleague, a demographer, expected the population to rise further to about one hundred and eighty million before it flattens off or begins to reduce. This situation and similar
compared to Ireland’s total of six million: North and South. Dhaka, the capital city, has a population of 14 to 17 million. It is difficult to live there. There is the dust in suspension that one encounters all over the subcontinent. On top of that people jostle each other everywhere all day long. There are pitiable beggars to be seen in the streets. Along with huge densities there are equally huge traffic jams. Just to travel around can cause major headaches. Because of the uncertainty and the long duration of these traffic jams it is difficult to plan meetings anywhere near peak traffic times.

In Dhaka we lived in the Gulsan 2 district which is probably one of the better residential areas. We were near the embassies and to the European Commission. But our local colleague was disappointed that we did not work from his office. That would have taken an additional two hours travel every day there and back. We were polite but firm that we were not going to do this. In Dhaka there are few hotels, if any, where alcohol is available. Normally expatriates will sign on as members of one of the local expatriate clubs. We were lucky that the Dutch club was within a 10 minutes rickshaw drive. I wanted to travel by a rickshaw because I thought it was environmentally clean. So it is. Tradition meets modern automation at night and without lights when the rickshaw attempts to cross a main junction with automobiles speeding along it. I suppose there are risks with everything - even going to work or going to the pub on a Saturday night. Happily we have survived to see another day. Bangla script made it all a little difficult to get around.

Previously I had never heard of the Chittagong Hill Tracts or of the fierce 30 year long civil conflict continuing up until 1997 when the Chittagong Accords were signed between the central government and the indigenous peoples who live there.

The Mission covered two major issues relating to the current situation and the absence of law and order which over the years has brought any semblance of a primary education system there to its knees. The first was the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and plans and strategies to improve the quality and availability of education to situations in the adjoining countries of South Asia has huge implications for Europe and I fear for future world security.
the indigenous peoples living there. The second challenge was to obtain agreement between the two UN agencies - UNDP and UNICEF - as to which of them would be the leading agency. There was a long-standing informal feud between both organisations at the local level. This was the pretext for our mission as informed to us by the European Commission.

I had had my 65th birthday in 2008 a month or two before the mission. I wondered then whether it was high time for me to hang up my boots and retire as a decent man should or whether I should continue consulting. I needn't have worried. As soon as both UN agencies realised I had served in the UN previously and the ILO was considered to be neutral they insisted I should be an arbitrator between them. I was very cautious and insisted that my team of three should always be present on discussions on their respective roles. I needed witnesses. I was surprised at the vehemence with which the senior officials of the two organisations fought with each other. It was much personalised. I don't think I would have been nearly as effective had I been a younger man. I was relieved and maybe after the experience I'll continue for a few more years ‘bearing the old man’s burden’.

We spent about four hours in one of these UN boats visiting remoter areas without roads.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, the CHT, as they are known universally are situated in the south eastern corner of Bangladesh and the territorial boundary of the region is in the east the Arakan (Southern Chin State) of Myanmar and Mizoram state of India, in the north by the Tripura state of India, in the west by Chittagong district and the south by Cox’s Bazaar district. It has a total land area of about 13.294 square kilometres equivalent to about 10% of the land area of Bangladesh. It straddles the fault line between peoples of Indian and Tibetan/Burmese origin. The indigenous tribes of the CHT differ from the Bangladeshi in terms of racial identity, languages, religion and culture.
In 1947, when India was being partitioned the Indians insisted that the major port of Calcutta should be joined to India. This left the newly formed country of East Pakistan without a deep water port. The compromise reached by the British was to cut off an autonomous region adjacent to the Burmese border and to add it into East Pakistan so as to add strategic depth behind the port of Chittagong. Sadly, it didn’t occur to anyone to request the opinion of the indigenous mountain peoples who are of Tibetan/Burmese origin and of Buddhist religion. These poor unsuspecting peoples were drafted into a Moslem majority country without any prior consultation. This unfortunate policy resulted in great suffering for the 11 different tribes, each linguistically different, who have inhabited the Chittagong Hill Tracts from time immemorial.

It covers a very beautiful area combining high hills and lake lands. In the hills it is mainly forest. It's a huge contrast to the rather banal and flat low-lying territory of the plains where 90% of the Bangladeshi population live. The hills, rivers and cliffs are covered with dense bamboo breaks, tall trees and creeper jungles. The valleys are covered with thick forest. The vegetation is characterised by semi-evergreen (deciduous) to tropical evergreen and dominated by tall trees. Most of the hills are covered with forests containing valuable timber trees, bamboos, canes and a kind of grass known as Shan. The fauna is rich and includes monkey, fox, jungle cat, fishing cat, wild boar, land turtle, king cobra, reticulated python, rat snake and other non-poisonous snakes together with large number of species of lizards and amphibians like frog and toad, and tree frogs. The bird life of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is wonderfully rich. More than 60 species of birds are found.

Highways and waterways are the chief means of communication but good roads are limited. The length of the metalled roads within Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban districts is 123 km, 134 km and 296 km respectively. Waterways are thus very important to the local economy. The length of the waterways in each of the above districts is 444 km, 640 km and 166 km respectively. The area is prone to serious earthquakes and to occasional flooding beside the lakes. While there are gas and oil deposits and coals across the region with the exception of the Kaptai hydraulic power station and associated paper mill there is little development as of yet. Hill people produce woven cotton goods and bamboo nets and baskets.

Overall, the CHT is one of the least developed areas of Bangladesh. Food poverty is widespread. Most indigenous peoples are not secured in relation to availability of food during most of the year. About sixty two per cent of households in the region irrespective of ethnicity according to the calorie intake (DCI) method are living below the absolute poverty line. There are other major issues in relation to support for human rights in which education is seen to have a major role.

Traditionally under the Mughals the CHT had been self-governing and this situation continued up until 1860 when the British took it over as their vassal territory. The indigenous people in CHT continued to have substantial autonomy until 1962 when the Government of Pakistan replaced the “excluded area ”status of the CHT with that

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of “tribal area”, reflecting the situation referred to earlier in West Pakistan, and began to send people other than those of indigenous origin to the region.

It was a wonderful experience to meet and to be able to relate to these most hospitable tribes’ people. Note the garland of flowers.

The population is about 1.3 million: very small in comparison to the total population of Bangladesh. Some ninety per cent live in the rural areas. While the national and official language is Bangla the l
In 1950, the Pakistan Government with financial assistance from Canada and the World Bank initiated the construction of the Kaptai Hydro-electric Project to meet the need for energy for industrialisation and growing domestic consumption. The creation of the Kaptai Lake and the construction of the Kaptai Dam have inundated 54% of the arable land of CHT. It caused displacement of over 100,000 people, mainly indigenous people, from their land. To sail on these beautiful waterways in a UN motorboat as we did to reach isolated communities is to marvel at the pristine beauty of your surroundings and to be oblivious to all that suffering.

On 3 April 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur, together with the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food sent an allegation letter to the Government of Bangladesh, to call its attention to information received concerning an alleged illegal seizure of the traditional lands of Jumma indigenous communities in Bandarban, Khagrachari and Merung districts, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Main items raised were:

‘According to the information received, since March 2007, an estimate of 4,500 acres of land has been reportedly taken away from Jumma individuals and communities in at least 16 villages or commons belonging to five Unions in Khagrachari district. Similar patterns seem to have been followed in other districts in the past.’

‘According to the information, the lands had been illegally and forcibly grabbed by Bengali settlers from different cluster villages gathered around army camps. It was reported that army personnel were directly involved in all these cases, creating a climate of fear among the local Jumma villagers and instigating the settlers to seize their lands. In other cases, army personnel have reportedly given grants to families willing to build their houses in the area. In other cases, army personnel have allegedly been directly involved in the planning and implementation of the settlement. It was also reported that army personnel have actively assisted the settlers in the construction of houses in the allegedly seized lands. Finally, in other instances, local administrators have been reportedly asked to provide forged land documents to the settlers. In many of the reported evictions, the indigenous families were forced to leave their homesteads, as well as their domestic fruit gardens, bamboo and teak orchards, upon which they traditionally rely for their subsistence.’

‘In addition, it was reported that in those cases in which the Jumma villages lack a title deed over their traditional lands, the authorities consider them to be State land, freely disposing of it to facilitate the settlement of non-indigenous settlers.’

‘Concern was expressed that these cases may be part of a systematic campaign to support the settlement of non-indigenous families in the Chittagong Hill Tracks, with the active support of the security forces, with an ultimate view to outnumber the local Jumma indigenous community in the region. Concern was further expressed that this process may be deliberately taking place to coincide with the state of emergency imposed on 11 January 2007 by the Caretaker Government.’

Extracts from the UN Rapporteur’s report to the Government of Bangladesh relating to serious abuses in the CHT.

The ratio of Indigenous People to Bengali settlers is approximately 51:49 (1991), while in 1860 it was almost 97:3. The local leadership has also lost control over land.

Combined these are regarded as major causes of the armed revolt that began in nineteen seventy and ended in the late nineteen nineties. In 1972 a delegation of indigenous CHT people submitted a memorandum to the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh demanding constitutional recognition of the indigenous people living in CHT and regional autonomy for the protection of their ethnic and cultural identity. This memorandum has never been recognized or reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Bangladesh. Furthermore, armed groups of Bengalese from the neighbouring districts initiated forceful grabbing of some land traditionally owned by the indigenous people.
The government, in response to the subsequent insurgencies by the indigenous people in the CHT, undertook a counter strategy combining the use of military force and socio-cultural interventions and socio-economic assistance for development. Substantial numbers of the indigenous population were expelled from their land and villages coupled with transmigration of tens of thousands of landless and poor Bengalese from the plains land who were settled in plots provided by the state. The main objectives behind this were that the settlement of a large number of Bengali households in CHT would enhance the size of the population considered to be loyal to the state and that these settlements would act as counterweight to the population demanding indigenous peoples’ rights and regional autonomy.

Basic education is the worst of the UNDP project sub-sectors affected by the conflict. Due to closures, relocation of schools and displacement of elements of the population combined with personal and livelihood insecurity the progress in terms of enrolment, literacy and completion of children of the indigenous minority population is much lower even than national Bangladeshi averages. Substantial numbers of households still remain excluded from the educational process.

Among the main problems met/experienced under the Pilot Phase was the insecurity which still pervades the post-conflict situation. There is still a degree of tension across the CHT some ten years after the Accords were signed and there is only a partial implementation. In addition and as noted earlier there are serious disputes between several of the different tribes. The mission noted a heavy military presence in

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21 Sixty two per cent of the Bangalee population are living in rural CHT for less than thirty years. About twenty two per cent of the indigenous population have lost their lands: Socio-economic Baseline Survey of Chittagong Hill Tracts: Dhaka: September 2008.
all three districts and especially in Bandarban. The itinerary of the mission in the field was organised in advance between the UNDP and the military authorities and was not flexible. On one occasion the military advised it was not possible to visit a community because of the security situation.

In summary: over the years since partition the minority peoples have suffered greatly. Successive governments at the centre have turned the screw ever more tightly. There has been the transfer of the poorest Bengali population up into the territory putting intense pressure on the simple way of life of the indigenous peoples. Land has been appropriated by the government and given to the settlers at the expense of the tribes’ people. As noted above the hydro-electric dam to the cities was built which took up to 50% of the available arable land. Eviction of the local peoples led to fifty thousand dead.

There has been civil war with massacre and atrocities perpetrated by the army and the local indigenous peoples. According to the UN the vast majority of these were committed by the army. It was the impression of the mission that the present high profile mounted by the UNDP in its project activities appears to act to some degree as a peaceful counterweight to the heavy military presence. In 1997 the Chittagong Peace Accords were signed between the government and the tribal representatives. These conferred a degree of autonomy to the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

But still villages in the CHT have lower access to education as compared to the rest of the country. A UNDP assessment mission pointed out that only one in five villages has a primary school, as compared to two schools for three villages in the rest of the country. For children, especially the younger ones, it is difficult to walk through the hilly terrain to reach the schools. The distance of education facilities is an important factor in enrolment at the right age. The net enrolment rate in primary education is
believed to range from a maximum of 61% of Bengali children to a minimum of 12% of ‘Mro’ community.\footnote{World Bank, unpublished paper, 2004}

During the mission we visited all three districts under the protection of the UN. The UNDP approach is unique and is aimed at providing sustainability for education through organisation and development of ‘self-help’ in the targeted communities. In the field we were made aware of the positive impact of the other aspects of the work such as the community empowerment and gender mainstreaming and the development of income generation and their potential to support primary education. We were particularly impressed by the strength of commitment made by the Village Development Committees interviewed for the provision of schooling. There was no other way - as a strapped central government has no funds for this – even if it wanted to.

Over the Hill Tracts as noted earlier the UNDP with EC funding is implementing primary education reforms under a pilot phase. The pilot has been quite successful in demonstrating that it is possible to strengthen and support existing systems such as the School Management Committees (SMCs) to achieve much more than they were previously achieving. It has demonstrated how new systems can be established and can have potential for achieving positive prospects for sustainability. The challenge for another education Phase II which we were to prepare was to take this preparatory phase forward and to lobby effectively for policy change at all levels to support the strengthening of basic education provision and essentially so children can realise their basic rights to education.

The CHT is the only region in Bangladesh where the authority for primary education is supposed to be decentralised to district level – to the three Hill District Councils (HDCs) and the Regional Council (RC) empowered by the CHT Peace Accord 1997, and the Hill District Council Act of 1998 to deliver a wide range of services. The roles and authority of the Councils under the new dispensation are still unclear and somewhat fragile. At present these institutions fall short in terms of human and financial resources. Unfortunately, while the Accords were signed they have only been implemented to a limited extent. There is reluctance on the part of certain elements of the government and of the army to have them fully implemented. The situation is very reminiscent of the post-conflict situation in Northern Ireland as of 2014. The difference is the level of international attention attributable to each post conflict situation.

\textit{Impressions}

I think this is an opportune time for to attempt to share some of the impressions made through meeting the indigenous people from the Hill Tracts. These peoples are amongst the most poor in the very poor country of Bangladesh. Medical assessments find them to be undernourished. Their lives are short. Again, it is well recorded that almost 60 per cent of them, adults as well as children, have no security for access to food for the order of up to six months in any year. Notwithstanding all of this the welcoming the mission received into their communities, their friendliness and relief to have us visit them, their willingness to share whatever they had with us made a huge and unforgettable impression.
It is certainly ironic that we always received the most generous reception from the poorest. From the beginning as we approached the village in our UN jeep the villagers were there to greet us: the gates decked out in flags and colourful cloths. When we had descended from the jeep we would meet with the head people of the village. They would present us with flowers tied in beautiful bouquets. They would place another garland of flowers around our necks. I smile as I recall feeling insects detaching themselves from the garlands and attaching themselves to my neck.

The villagers would line the approach to the village on both sides and we would walk between them as they showered us with flower petals from the bowls they carried. We soon managed to overcome our embarrassment and to enjoy their pleasure and their welcoming - and all the excitement generated. Normally with our armed guards who always were so much out of place we would be ushered into the central area of the village where a table would have been set facing the crowd of chatting, friendly, and inquisitive people. They would be seated on the ground in family groups; their bemused children looking at these white people and enquiring from their mothers or fathers as to where we came from. Occasionally a young child cries out or squabbles or one who insists on being breast fed announces its needs during the proceedings. Personally, I have found it a revelation in speaking to these friendly people through an interpreter as to how a normal and informative and pleasant such a dialogue could be.

You are truly a part of a village celebration. The village head man opens the proceedings. After a few dignified words of welcome and some questions and replies put somewhat formally the floor would be thrown open for any interested person to put questions to us as to the purpose of visit or the impressions we had of their village and of their hopes for the education of their children. In this simple way we could
exchange a great deal of information. The barriers were let fall and we were speaking together as friends.

![A happy band of locals and guests – notice the soldier is carrying my flowers in his right hand as I took the picture.](image)

At the same time for us the spectacle was so unusual and colourful. The ladies dressed in such colourful saris. Some would be breastfeeding others would have their arms around their happy contented children as they spoke to us. The men were not so colourfully dressed but they presented a spectacle as they pulled on their simple bamboo pipes, puffing contentedly. At times I thought I was in a Garden of Eden. My mind went back to a primitive picture I had collected in Tanzania which showed a scene from the Garden of Eden with the lion lying down with the lamb, the elephants, and the snakes - all in one happy consortium. It was so charming.

While the people we met possessed a natural dignity and - given it was so unusual for them to meet or to talk with strangers from the so-called developed world - they were quite nonplussed by the occasion. I am convinced there is no difference between most of us whether we come from the West with our cars and our obesity and our rigid lifestyles and these people who appear to be so close to nature. At the same time these people have needs just as we do and are much more exposed to the basic needs of providing food and nutrition for their families. The realisation that life was so hard for them humbled me a lot.

After the discussion was complete there was always the invitation to join the people for a simple meal. The meal would consist of colourful local fruits mainly served with nuts and with banana and other delicacies and washed down with coconut milk. This would give the community the opportunity to present their children to us. This was the occasion when they would have us entertained by their children singing and dancing and sometimes both. The villagers looked forward to this with great interest and enthusiasm. I remember saying to an elder of the village that I loved the children and wished I could take them home to Ireland with me.
I enjoyed being with these gentle people so much. Their lives appeared to be so simple and close to nature. At the same time as noted above this friendly show covered up the harshest of realities. Some of these people would have been expelled or exiled or would have lost relatives in the troubles leading up to the peace accords. It often crossed my mind that these people or people like them had borne the hideous impact of the construction of the dam and clearing out of the local people and the resultant deaths.

There was informality mixed with hospitality. On one occasion we three were invited to one of the elder women’s homes. We sat down on mats on the earthen floor and enjoyed a happy lunch with a good lot of banter and witty gestures. They could see we were enjoying ourselves. Then the nice old lady produced a bottle of twice-distilled Duitse Wine – it sounded to mean German wine but that was just a coincidence. Anyway, it was the best of its kind. It certainly packed a punch! She insisted we took the bottle but we only accepted it if she would accept money towards the school.

I think all of us and that would include our local counterpart colleague, were so impressed by the simple dignity and hospitality shown to us. This was irrespective as to whether it was the tribes’ people or the settlers or a combination of both that we had met. On one visit we were really excited to be regaled by the local male traditional band. The wind instruments the band used were all made from hollowed out vegetables. They had hollow pipes. On top of the pipes were positioned what looked like amplifiers but which must have been made from the simple vegetable material. The sound they made was very much like the Highland bagpipes but not so loud. In addition to these - I call them flutes - there were the more conventional drums. The orchestra thus equipped introduced us to what to me was quite acceptable music - if unusual. But after all I am well acquainted with traditional Irish music which had some resemblance to it. I certainly felt they would create a sensation if they could be persuaded to perform in a traditional pub in Ireland.
Young girls displaying their traditional dances.

At the same time one has to be impressed with the evidence that even in such a deprived society there was still an appetite for making music. The instruments showed that there is a tradition and one that was appreciated in the community. The orchestra playing before us was a way they demonstrated the expression of hospitality and respect to their visitors.

In contrast to the countryside the towns we visited in each of the three districts for the most part were not so attractive. There were the usual bazaars where there were souvenirs and good quality traditional clothing for sale. The hotels were very simple. One in Bandarban where we had a workshop was really impressive. This was an exception. The menus were somewhat limited. If you wanted omelette you got omelette. On the other hand the waiters could usually manage to organise our bottle of the Duitse wine, which was always much appreciated. There was more than one location when I woke up to hear multi-pede footsteps of little and not so little cockroaches waltzing across the room.

During a mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a team we were all concerned with the effects on the livelihoods and on the poverty levels, which the trans-plantation of people from the destitute areas of the plains to the Tracts might have. We were concerned with equity issues, and the rights of these poor tribal peoples to equality and decency before the law. It was my conviction that a wrong was being done through the policies of successive Governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh in planting alien Bangladeshi Muslims into their midst. But in spending some time in Dhaka with occasional visits into the communities I was made aware, painfully aware, of the levels of abject poverty which exist both in the slums of Dhaka and the other large cities and along the banks of the major rivers which change course annually.
causing destruction and havoc to the poorest populations there who try to make a living along their banks.

The question I put to myself concerns the nature of the rights of all the peoples of Bangladesh, including the Chittagong hill tribes. Is it not valid for a government to try to ease the pain of and even more abject poverty by translating some of the poorest of the Bangladeshi Muslim poor to have a marginally better prospect of life in the Chittagong Tracts? I can see, there is a strong case for this government policy but at the same time the solution has to take into account the rights to the survival of the indigenous tribal peoples. I see these rights to be paramount in so far as these are areas in which the indigenous tribal peoples have traditionally lived over centuries.

Without the United Nations presence they run the risk of being eliminated and destroyed. We - all of us - have a right to peace and security wherever we live and these rights should not be challenged just so as to offer another and in this case the majority Muslim population an improved opportunity to make a living. I suppose in some ways it represents the same arguments for and against the Plantation of Ulster in 1609 and other European experiences where the introduction of an alien population into an already impoverished area can only be to create conflicts and hatreds such as those that emerged from a similar situation more than three hundred years ago in Ireland.

On returning to our main task namely to prepare a report on the capacity and ability of the two UN agencies to implement wide-scale education reforms across the CHT we concluded that UNDP was working effectively on the ground. On the other hand while it was carrying out good and useful work it was not taking into account at the macro level the chaotic and poorly managed education system into which their activities had to be integrated. The proposal prepared by UNDP didn't take into account adequately the need for it to have long-term sustainable policies for the schools created to ensure takeover by the relevant government Department of Primary Education adequately supported by the community who would pay for teachers’ salaries and for learning materials. Nor was there an adequate provision for strengthening staff responsible for education implementation in the Regional Council and the three Hill District Councils.

The UNDP while good on the ground in implementing the reform strategies appeared to us to have missed a bigger picture: that of ensuring that the central government agencies were engaged and approved of the reforms being applied. This in our opinion wouldn’t be easy to achieve but successful integration into the central government administration was the only guarantee of long-term sustainability after the UN had withdrawn. We recommended that UNDP be appointed by the EC and funded adequately subject to their proposals being adjusted to take these longer-term sustainability issues into consideration.

Turning to the UN agencies themselves we became conscious of the institutional gap that existed between UNDP and UNICEF and of their inability to cooperate or to work together on an advocacy programme to promote the support promised for the CHT Accords. It was depressing that neither was prepared to work with the other. At times the discussions at which we participated became very heated indeed. The one-page draft Memorandum of Understanding they produced jointly for us was not
convincing. Having seen them attempt to work together at senior management level we felt such an agreement could easily become unstitched. Sadly we did not have much faith in the agreement proposed by the MoU.

In taking this approach it was our intention to provide support to the children of the CHT and to their parents and guardians. Inter-institutional rivalries we felt should have no place in a situation where the needs and the poverty are so great. In making such recommendations we were aware that we passed on substantial pressure to the local EC Delegation who would be there over the longer term. But we had been impressed with the supportive stance they had taken with respect to the human rights of the CHT peoples; irrespective of whether they are the tribespeople or the impoverished settlers.

A spectre which haunted us over much on the mission in November/December 2008 was the ferocious attack on the financial services centre of Mumbai including the beautiful old Raj Hotel by a group claiming to represent Muslims coming from Pakistan. Following the attack the security services across India were strengthened and in the bureaucratic way that India is famous for it certainly contributed to delays and uncertainty for us on the way back to Europe.

**A sequel: the Bangladesh Secondary Education Sector Review March/April 2009.**

I was surprised following the earlier mission to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the report write-ups, which finished about February 2009 to be invited back as team leader and part of a three-man team to carry out a review of the 26,000 odd secondary schools, the policy adopted by the Ministry of Education for them and to identify a project for strengthening the quality of secondary education which the European Commission could support.
I suppose looking back as a team we had been critical of some of the projects the Commission had supported in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where schools had no prospect of sustainability and following a five year period of support had to close down, leaving the children with no further prospects of education. There had been some discussion and not a little tension between the Delegation and us as a team on this point. We had conceded on some small issues but not a lot. The Delegation appeared to be satisfied. It was only afterwards that they noticed that some of the more telling criticisms remained in the document they had accepted.

On March 16th 2009 I flew Dublin to Amsterdam to Dubai and onwards to Dhaka. In Amsterdam with my colleagues, I was present at a party, where each of the seven nationalities involved in the office contributed a native dish. For me it was salmon and some whiskey.

The next day after leaving Dubai I became very sick indeed. It was the worst I've ever experienced. At this stage in my life, I'm beginning to dread these long, complicated flight schedules. I remember arriving in Dhaka and standing in the visa queue and vomiting. A half an hour later when I arrived back in my previous hotel I repeated the performance.

After that induction anything was an improvement. I enjoyed a three week long bout of hard work with my Scots and my Bangladeshi counterparts. I met several of my old friends including in the World Bank a lady I had worked with on mission 15 years before in Karachi. Then she had presented me with a birthday cake for my 50th birthday. On meeting her in the World Bank the first question she asked was “how was my boat?” Meeting again with old friends and through them developing an informal network and exchanging notes undoubtedly helps us to be much more effective. It even meant that often we gained more insights into what organisations such as the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank were doing than the permanent EC Delegation in Dhaka had.

During our stay in Dhaka, we learned a lot about the perception of threats - apparent or real – coming from the Muslim Koranic schools or madrasas. The madrasas cater for the most impoverished communities in Bangladesh. Earlier in Pakistan the madrasas located around the city of Peshawar in the North West Frontier province gave rise to that murderous regime, the Taliban, which took control of Afghanistan. Under that regime girls’ schools were closed down and women's lives restricted strictly within the house and to the savage and repressive sharia law system. In 2009 there were active fears at the government and at international level that the madrasas in Bangladesh would adopt similar approaches. In our briefing by the Delegation we were instructed to take into consideration in making any recommendations that any suggestion that the EC in Brussels should support terrorism was out of the question. As individual EC citizens we as team members didn’t expect any other attitude.

In Bangladesh just fewer than nine million students are enrolled in about twenty seven thousand secondary institutions, excluding madrasas. There are about seven thousand madrasas with almost two million students in attendance. These latter students are important because they represent the children of the poorest communities. These communities would normally be targeted for support by the donor agencies but there was an over-arching hesitation arising from the Pakistani precedent.
I found the government-supported madrasas where the government pays most if not all of the teacher salaries to be very similar to the denominational schools in Ireland or in the UK, the Netherlands, and many other European countries. I certainly wouldn't bracket them or associate them with fundamentalists. It surprised us therefore that up to our mission none of the donors appeared to have studied these state-supported madrasa schools to the extent either of the curriculum in use, the role of religion in the learning process or the application of any kind of other sinister disciplines.

As a team we visited, a typical state-supported madrasa and found to our surprise, that 16-year-olds were studying in mixed classes. The major focus of the school management was on gaining parity with the best of the secular state schools and on obtaining better prospects for promotion into tertiary level. As a team we will admit that our sampling was more than a little limited. We had every opportunity to go to another school and found a similar situation applied. But a few schools out of seven thousand schools like one swallow ‘won’t make a summer’. Nevertheless, what we did find was good and acceptable. It did raise questions about the conventional wisdom amongst the donor community in relation to the state run madrassas. We recommended that a more detailed and comprehensive assessment be organised. In highlighting the difference between the conventional wisdom, and what we encountered we nevertheless hope that the survey results will go some way to

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23 There are also another stream of Qawmi Madrasas which has no contact at all with the state and where doubts could have been much more realistic. During the mission one of them was raided by the police and bombs, munitions and weapons were found. These have no connection with the state-supported madrasas.

24 It did come to our attention however, that some of the Development Banks had also advocated such a study.
convincing the donors to reconsider and perhaps to provide support to these very under-resourced institutions. I suppose it's tricky to come to conclusions on the radicalism or non-radicalism of the state-supported madrasa schools - when your findings will be presented in advance of such a national survey.

To end on a cultural note: during one of several visits to the Delegation we met the Delegate (Ambassador). As part of his work he had been fostering cultural relationships between Bangladesh and the European Union. A local talent he had come across was Shambu Acharya, a very famous local Pata painter. ‘Patachitra’ is an age-old form of popular art which has been practiced in what is now Bangladesh since the twelfth century. Pata pictures depicted scenes from religious stories and cultural myths and themes from life in rural Bangladesh. Rural bards and story-tellers would use these scrolls which had pictures depicting various events and the themes of the stories they would tell.

The earliest ‘patuas’ usually took the themes for their paintings from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, various legends, myths and religious stories and later expanded the range by including many popular and secular stories of the land. Patachitra, like many other popular folk arts of Bengal such as pottery and the weaving of Muslin was practiced in families from generation to generation. The skills
and the commitment to the art form were handed down from the fathers to their sons and daughters.

The family of Shambu Acharya has been practicing ‘patachitra’ or scroll painting for more than four hundred years and eight generations. He uses only local materials for his paintings. For the canvas he uses ‘markin’ cloth applying age-old techniques. The cloth is first layered with mud or cow dung and dried. It is then layered again with a paste made from tamarind seeds and powder of brick and chalk. This canvas lasts for ages. For making his colour he uses black ink made from the smoke of flames, zinc oxide, vermilion, egg yolk, the sticky juice of wood apples and various kinds of earth colour.

I was thrilled to be able to purchase one of his paintings entitled ‘Village bride making herself beautiful’. It is a beautiful addition to the pictures, wall hangings, batiques, tapestries and carpets I’ve collected over the years which contributes to making our house something of a museum. I hope it will remain in the family for many years to come.
Chapter XIV

Post-conflict Eritrea – a land of pride and indeed some prejudice

This Chapter examines another experience gained in a little known, somewhat sad and troubled faraway country which shares a number of parallels with countries like the Chittagong Hill Tracts or its neighbour Yemen across the Red Sea - or even Albania. I see it as a country very much in transition. Not much is known of the country so I trust I shall be forgiven for dwelling in a little detail on the situation there as our mission team discovered it.

Eritrea is the youngest sovereign state in Africa, having achieved formal independence only in 1993. Two thirds of the population live in rural and semi-rural areas. Agriculture and pastoralism are the main sources of livelihood for 80% of Eritrea’s population. Approximately one third of the population are nomads. Eritrea’s GDP per capita is estimated at US$200. The Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper indicates that an estimated 66% of the population are poor. Of these UNICEF estimates that some 37% are extremely poor and live below the food poverty line. Eritrea ranks 157 out of 177 countries according to the Human Development Report 2006.

The history of Eritrea is tied to its strategic position on the African side of the Red Sea with a coastline that extends more than 1,000 km. Many scientists believe that it is from this area that anatomically modern humans first expanded out of Africa. Later from across the Red Sea came various invaders (and colonizers) such as the Saudi

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25 It lost this position in 2012 when South Sudan proclaimed its independence.
26 Source: IMF Article IV Consultations 2005, Staff Report.
28 I’m indebted to Wikipedia for some of the following historical background.
Arabians hailing from the present-day Yemen area, the Ottoman Turks, the Portuguese from Goa (India), the Egyptians, the British and, in the 19th century, the Italians. Over the centuries, invaders also came from the neighbouring countries of Africa to the south (Ethiopia) and to the west (Sudan). However, present-day Eritrea was largely impacted and most strongly influenced by the Italian invaders in the 19th century.

In the period following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, when the European powers scrambled for territory in Africa and tried to establish coaling stations for their ships Italy invaded and occupied Eritrea. On January 1, 1890 Eritrea officially became a colony of Italy. In 1936 it became a province of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana), along with Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. The British armed forces expelled those of Italy in 1941 and took over the administration of the country which had been set up by the Italians. The British continued to administer the territory under a UN Mandate until 1951 when Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia as per UN resolution 390(A) under the prompting of the United States and adopted in December 1950.

The strategic importance of Eritrea due to its Red Sea coastline and mineral resources was the main cause for Eritrea's annexation by Ethiopia as its 14th province in 1962. This was the culmination of a gradual process of takeover by the Ethiopian authorities; a process which included a 1959 edict establishing the compulsory teaching of Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia in all Eritrean schools. Strange that this long war broke out between two Christian or largely Christian countries situated just across the Red Sea from Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. In contrast to East and
Southern African countries the country has been Christian since the 1st Century AD. It wasn’t necessary to send in the missionaries to these Coptic peoples.

The lack of regard for the wishes of the majority of the Eritrean population led to the formation of an independence movement in the early 1960s which erupted into a 30-year war against successive Ethiopian governments that ended in 1991. Following an UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea (dubbed UNOVER) in which the Eritrean people overwhelmingly voted for independence, Eritrea declared its independence and gained international recognition in 1993.

The thirty year-long bitter border conflict with neighbouring Ethiopia led to the death of approximately 10% of the population estimated then at 4 million. The war has displaced farmers and households. Then the frequent droughts have reduced the availability of water for human consumption and livestock production. The problem of food security has exacerbated malnutrition affecting more than 40 percent of under-five year old children in some regions.

On Saturday 19th June 2010 there were some 10,000 people holding a vigil and marching together through Asmara with their candles to commemorate the dead of the long war with Ethiopia. I was very moved by it.

My earliest memories of post-independent Ireland governed by the Fianna Fail (Soldiers of Freedom) gave me some insights into Eritrean political realities. There was the Government composed of military people and far removed from civilian administrators. There was the same immense pride in the sacrifices leading to achievement of independence coupled to concepts of sacrifice and faithfulness to the memory of the lost comrades who had made the ultimate sacrifice. But there was little flexibility either in the way the Eritrean Government pandered to the UN or other international agencies. In mitigation there has to be recognition of the way the UN earlier had sold them down the river to Ethiopia and against their wishes.

A contradiction in Government policies relates to its dealings with the international Eritrean Diaspora. There are some millions living abroad and emigrants’ remittances are taxed. Indeed the Government in recent times has refused visas for travelling
abroad to citizens aged less than 53 years for women and an even older age for men. They insist they remain in the Defence Reserves in the event of another war with Ethiopia or another of the country’s neighbours. Sadly many of the most educated try to cross into the neighbouring countries for better jobs and as a first step towards ultimate migration to the West. I was advised that about 50% of those who attempt succeed. *Anecdotal evidence assumes that another 25% are shot attempting escape and the remainder are caught and imprisoned.* Certainly we were informed that Ministers travelling abroad are usually given a hard time by the members of the Eritrean diaspora they visit. There is much resentment and ill-feeling between the representatives of the emigrant communities and the Government.

There is nothing like a site visit to a school to provide information on focus and direction. Here in a provincial school in Eritrea we see colour and brightness as well as a sign on the wall proclaiming “Girls are at least as intelligent as boys.” And “Educate a woman and you educate a whole family”.

Despite these challenges, Eritrea happens to be one of the only three sub-Saharan countries that are on track to meet “Millennium Development Goal 4 (MDG 4)” with its child survival targets and one of the seven countries to have managed to reduce child mortality by more than 50%. In addition, the country has been able to reduce malaria morbidity by more than 86% and mortality due to malaria by more than 82%, making it one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to have met the Abuja "Roll Back Malaria" targets. Eritrea is projected to achieve eight of the ten MDG targets by 2015. This is no small achievement for a small beleaguered country.

The country has long-term prospects for revenues from the development of offshore oil, offshore fishing, exploitation of mineral resources and tourism. But it's economic future depends on its ability to master fundamental social and economic problems, e.g., overcoming illiteracy, promoting job creation, expanding technical training, attracting foreign investment, and streamlining the bureaucracy. The key to all these improvements have to depend on a breakthrough in relations with neighbouring states.

Eritrea is a single-party state. Though its constitution, adopted in 1997, stipulates that the state is a presidential republic with a unicameral parliamentary democracy it has...
yet to be implemented. According to the government this is due to the prevailing border conflict with Ethiopia, which began in May 1998. Independent local sources of political information on Eritrean domestic politics are scarce; in September 2001 the government closed down all of the nation's privately owned print media. Outspoken critics of the government have been arrested and held without trial, according to various international observers including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Asmara: serving myself at a Ministerial reception. It certainly wasn’t all like this. The World Bank Task Master and an old friend from Pakistan, is on my left with senior Ministry officials on my right.

There have been significant changes at domestic and sub-regional levels: there is the recent resolution of the protracted border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia but with continuing border tensions, the departure from Eritrea of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the problems associated with a continuing 'no war no peace' situation. These factors collectively impose upon Eritrea considerable social, political and economic consequences at national and local levels. The present situation is exacerbated by the impact of the global economic downturn and its impact on investment and donor decision-making as well as deteriorating global food insecurity, escalating prices for essential food items and the effect of climate change on an already precarious domestic food production sector and limited water resources.

Then there is the plight of children caught up in these hostilities. UNICEF records from the Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare (MOLHW) that preliminary findings from a national survey conducted in 2005 indicate that there are 120,000 orphans in the country. Close to ten per cent of children under-15 lost one or both biological parents due to war, drought, and displacement and to some extent HIV/AIDS. Similarly, the number of street children is growing due to economic factors. The MOLHW estimate stands at about 5,000 street children, mainly in major urban areas.
The location of Eritrea presents a huge geographical/political conundrum. Tragically for Eritrea with a population of less than four million it cuts off its much larger neighbour Ethiopia with ten times its population from direct access to the Red Sea. The un-demarcated border with Ethiopia is the primary external issue currently facing Eritrea. Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia turned from that of cautious mutual tolerance, following the 30-year war for Eritrean independence to a deadly rivalry that led to the outbreak of hostilities from May 1998 to June 2000 which claimed approximately 70,000 Eritrean and Ethiopian casualties.

I felt that over time and when memories of the terrible war have faded somewhat that it might be possible for agreement to be reached which allows Ethiopia access through an international tax free agreement to the sea much like the way that Afghanistan used to enjoy access to the Pakistani warm water ports on the Arabian Sea. But given the adversarial approaches of both countries I wouldn't be too optimistic. Sadly, I anticipate continuous destabilisation in the region until some such arrangement is brokered: maybe by the United Nations although it has to be borne in mind that the UN was complicit in starting the long war by transferring the sovereignty of Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place.

For a small poor country Eritrea's relations with its other neighbours are very complicated as well as being somewhat downright cantankerous. Obviously they have been strained due to a series of wars and disputes and the suspicions engendered by them. These include an un-demarcated border with Sudan, a war with Yemen over the Hanish Islands in 1996 and a recent border conflict with Ethiopia. As part of an agreement to cease hostilities the two nations agreed to refer the issue to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in 1998. Yemen was granted full ownership of the larger islands while Eritrea was awarded the peripheral islands to the southwest of the larger islands. At the conclusion of the proceedings, both nations acquiesced to the decision. Since 1996, both governments have remained wary of one another but relations are relatively normal. The un-demarcated border with Sudan has posed a problem for Eritrean external relations for most of the nation's existence. Somewhat ironically, Eritrea has been recognized as a broker for peace between the separate factions of the recent Sudanese civil war.

In terms of other international relationships the country follows its own somewhat austere path. Its relationship with the United States is complicated. Although the two nations have a close working relationship regarding the on-going war on terror there has been a growing tension in other areas. Relations worsened as recently as October 2008 when a U.S. Assistant Secretary of State called the nation a 'state sponsor of terrorism' and stated that the U.S. government might add Eritrea to its list of rogue states along with Iran and Sudan. The reason for this was the presence of an exiled Somali Islamist leader, whom the U.S. suspects of having links to Al Qaeda, at a recent Somali opposition conference in Asmara.

It is quite possible that this souring of relations has caused the U.S. Government to put pressure on Eritrea by insisting that the World Bank suspend further assistance to the country based on a fairly superficial reason; Eritrea as a HIPPIIC beneficiary is required to inform the Bank when it takes out further loans or credits from whatever source. While most indebted HIPPIIC countries do this Eritrea with its touchy sense of pride refuses to.
During the week of August 2, 2009, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed that Eritrea was supplying weapons to a Somali militant group. Although Eritrea denied this accusation in a public statement the following day the United Nations, with the backing of the African Union, imposed sanctions and an arms embargo on Eritrea under Resolution 1907 for its role in Somalia and refusal to withdraw troops from the border with Djibouti. On its part, Eritrea is hosting members of the ousted Union of Islamic Courts and the Somali Free Parliament. The Eritrean government has been accused of sponsoring, arming and hosting numerous militant leaderships and separatist rebels in the Horn of Africa. In contrast, Eritrea's relationships with Italy and the EU generally are still reasonably strong and don’t not seem to be as fraught as is its relationship with the U.S.

While the Eritrean Coptic Church is an historic institution spanning over two thousand years of history it also has to take into consideration two other important Christian communities – the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholics. Then approximately half of the population down in the coastal areas is Moslem. I found it strangely ecumenical in Asmara to be woken at 5am by the Muezzin calling on his fellows to get out of bed. Then at 6am it was followed by the Angelus bells calling out the Christians.

The Italians as noted earlier had established Eritrea and Ethiopia as the bases for their East African Empire and first began to colonise the country in the 1860s. While they were here they spent a huge amount of energy in creating Italian habitats with Italian

30 EC support to Eritrea for the period 2011 – 2014 will amount to €122 million.
design; this included converting the main city of Asmara and the larger towns into facsimiles of Southern Italian cities and towns. Sometimes I felt it necessary to pinch myself and to wake up and tell myself that this was Eritrea in Eastern Africa and not a part of Italy to the south of Rome or Naples.

It is obvious that the Eritreans liked and adopted much of the Italian culture. I’m sure there must have been a considerable amount of inter-racial relationships and inter-marriage. One thing which struck me very forcibly was the prevalence of sidewalk cafes all along the streets of Asmara and frequented by a heterogeneous groups from all backgrounds including bureaucrats, teachers, farmers and herdsmen and their womenfolk visiting for the day. There was still a fair amount of Italian spoken.

Bird watching with our guide just outside Asmara. We saw 28 different species including a crested eagle in just 3 hours.

There was a very dignified and elegant Italian Club with an open square shaded by tall palm trees where we all loved to go after work. The proprietor had lived for more than twenty years and ran a restaurant with his family near Turino. He somehow through his remaining family there was able to lay his hands on Italian prosciutto – a traditional finely sliced ham which he served up with the local cold white wine. Sometimes I felt bolted to my seat. We’d sit and observe the young people holding hands and drinking their coffees as the sun moved from behind the relevant palm tree or in the evening when the stars came out. Yes, people were poor but somehow they cherished these old Italian cultural habits they had inherited.

Another strong custom of the Eritreans is the two to three hour coffee ceremony which is performed domestically in traditional homes maybe three times a day. I witnessed it once. There is duty and elegance and the whole is done with a quiet dignity and with flowers. I felt so very privileged to be present. Sadly all coffee traditionally comes from the benighted neighbouring Ethiopia. The Eritreans want it

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but have to pay more because there is no open border between it and Ethiopia. They have to import it indirectly from the Sudan or even Egypt and at inflated prices.

The Project

Between May and July 2010 I was team leader of a group consisting of two ladies; one Dutch, one Finnish, a Welsh male architect and myself. Our task was to review the state of progress by the EC and the World Bank in relation to the EC-Support for Education in Eritrea (EC-SEE) which was signed in 2005 between the EC in Brussels and the Government of Eritrea. Before coming out I had read very little about the country’s very complex politics or of its relations with its neighbours. The team leader from the previous EC mission there when with me subsequently in Vietnam had advised me he didn’t like the place much and that he had no intention of visiting it a second time.

He emphasised that as team leader he had spent most of his time organising security passes to enable the team to move outside Asmara and organising supplies of fuel for the four wheel drives. It also was well known that the previous EC mission had been a disaster with two British professors having a very public fall-out and with very unwise and personalised emails flooding the air waves. We were determined this wasn’t going to happen on our watch. Happily it didn’t and all four of us got on very well together. A glass of wine together each evening certainly helped!

The team was based in Asmara the Italianate capital at about 2,500m up in the Eritrean Highlands. It spent most of its time organising interviews with most of the education stakeholders in the capital of approximately 300,000 people. Occasionally - but not often enough - we went on site visits to particular Zobas or regions. The Ministry of Education (MoE) generally responded well to all our appointments and questions. The feedback we had from senior government officials was that central government appeared to be in a quandary between the imminent closure of the EC
project supporting education in a few months – in December 2010 to be precise - should a rider for a three-year extension to the project fail to be approved by EC HQ in Brussels.

Expenditures under the project were seen to be falling far short of the amounts contained in the Financing Agreement. After five years of implementation and with only 6 months to go only about half the budget had been expended. It was unlikely that the some of the most important EC funded schools infrastructure could be completed in the absence of the three-year extension sought. This was being implemented for the EC by the World Bank. The expected outcomes could be expected to have major implications for a range of priority education services and delivery systems planned.

Finally the mission gleaned from discussions with senior officials that there was awareness that the EC under the current project made no provision for an exit strategy. The World Bank had signalled its intention to close its portion of the overall project without adequate time to complete the schools and infrastructures it had contracted to execute with EC funding. Nor was there at this stage in time any provision in sight for a follow-on project from either the EC or the World Bank which would act to ensure that the progress in quality made under the project could be bedded in and become sustainable. Thus, the situation presented had little to commend it. It was my opinion that much but not all of the responsibility could be seen to lie at the feet either of the local EC Delegation in Asmara or the World Bank.

To be precise the whole project was in a state of uncertainty due to the prolonged processing by the EC of the Rider to extend the timeframe of the project for EC funded construction to 2013; the imminent expiry of the Administrative Agreement with the World Bank for the Trust Fund on August 31st and oversights in recognising administrative deadlines for processing an extension. All this was further seriously compounded by targeted closure of the World Bank education project by 28th February 2011 and the announcement of its intention not to extend or renew activities in Eritrea. The World Bank also announced that despite the closing date of the Trust Fund Agreement with the EC and the government the Bank’s procedures would prevent further use of EC funds. As might be expected there was a public breakdown in communications between the local resident office of the World Bank and the EC Delegation.

Our report findings satisfied neither the EC nor the World Bank. Amongst our findings was that “in its management of project implementation the European Commission Delegation has tried hard to reach a balance between “objectives achievement” and “compliance” the latter with tight procedural and reporting requirements. Relations between the Delegation and the Ministry and the Ministry’s Project Management Unit (PMU) had gone through several difficult patches since project commencement. In chronicling these events and in divining their causes it was clear to us as a team that the donor agencies had fallen out and were accusing each other for the less than successful outcomes now expected. Personally, I am of the strong opinion that the ECD was very genuine in its policy of providing support to Eritrea. It just hadn’t been realistic or effective in the way it had planned, communicated and managed its side of the project.
At the same time the mission was aware of many claims and counter claims between the ECD and the World Bank as a background to the withdrawal of the World Bank. Unhelpful and sometimes very direct and somewhat less than diplomatic letters were being fired off by these two major agencies - now turned protagonists. At the same time my colleagues and I had a feeling that as sometimes happens - when the U.S. Government wants to - it can put pressure on a government through exerting pressures through agencies over which it has control such as the World Bank.

Whatever the story is - we as a team came away with a great deal of disappointment. We knew the real stakeholders, those who would inevitably lose out, were the girls and boys at primary level who would miss the possibility of ever having an education and who would as a result likely face a future “as hewers of wood and drawers of water”. We recognised too that perhaps the Ministry could have been more au fait with dealing with these major international donors and to have moved things onwards from time to time. At the same time this was a first experience for a Ministry of Education emerging from a post-conflict situation with all the baggage that entails and it was apparent that they did try to cope as best they could.

As we prepared our report and we reflected on all of these issues we were reminded of that old African saying that “when the elephants fight only the grass gets trampled”.
Epilogue…

The preceding pages cover the first part of my life or up to my seventieth year of age. I’m aware as I finish that images in the minds of future generations will be conditioned by insights and experiences I shall never witness. My life has spanned the time since the last World War which ended in 1945 - some two years after I was born. Born and reared on a small island on the periphery of Europe I am proud to have followed a career which I couldn’t have imagined possible without the European Union’s existence.

I find myself asking whether the extended exercise in writing this memoir with these selective memories makes for a useful exercise. An editor might complain with some justification at the lack of balance as between the attention given to the various missions covered. In presenting my experiences I’ve focused on issues that interested me personally; some banal perhaps; others more serious. But does it reveal anything of the hard issues relating to goodness and evil in this world of ours? I think of deprivation I’ve observed, then the venality and corruption, the treatment of women. Nearer to home there is the religious abuse and cover-ups, the political corruption and the banking scandals.

I used to think that history traced a slow faltering evolution towards improvement, the transfer of best practices and an uplifting of the spirit and the conditions under which the mass of mankind lives out its short span. Now I’m not so sure. On the big issues have I distinguished between the numerous vocal, sometimes spurious, calls of faith; for divine interventions and have I contrasted them with the adoption of liberal, scientific rational solutions? Have I as a consultant/advisor conformed to the rightful expectations of the recipient country or criticised it sufficiently, based on my European conditioning and background? This has to be a key question for all those engaged in bridge-building between the developed and the developing worlds.

Of course there have been the difficult situations and ordinary people existing in them who were inspired to rise to provide some degree of leadership and who then like Cincinnatus the Roman returned to their farms. These are the unsung heroes I identify. Amongst them are the men and women who sometimes as I have indicated have found themselves forced to make very, very hard choices.

Returning to my own personal world and reflecting on the foregoing I begin to realise that perhaps over my life I’ve sought challenge and excitement rather than a security allied at home to a slow trajectory onwards towards a successful career. Maybe I’ve been aware that there is just one life – and that therefore I should attempt to maximise whatever opportunities presented. On single major issues - especially in my younger days - like so many others I've marched and demonstrated. But did I translate these local enthusiasms to a lifelong commitment for equitable change to the lot of the poorest or marginalised?

Perhaps I may have built some bridges to people of different backgrounds and cultures? I see it as impossible to gauge any degree of personal impact. At its best and perhaps in a secular way while I didn't achieve so much - I'd like to feel to some
degree my actions could be construed as having attempted to have fought 'the good secular fight'.

Overall in reflecting on what I’ve written - the major impression is just how fast my life has passed! Then there are the ‘ups and downs’ in the course of maintaining close friendships and relationships and the realisation that all don’t last – for one reason or another. Life has many upsides and downsides. I suppose I’ve considered myself to be an optimist and I’m happy that this is so.

We are mortal and I think I hear distant echoes of a bell tolling. Somewhere I’ve read that it’s principally atheists or unreligious people such as me who devote so much time to writing autobiographies. They do this so as to ensure as far as is possible their memories will persist. In contrast, religious people are confident they have far more adequate safeguards with their souls plumbing much greater eternities.

To conclude; on my way back from Dalkey on a lovely February spring day when the French are bulldozing their way to another famous rugby victory over Ireland and I’m returning home to Sandycove with a bottle of wine for the evening’s dinner party I come across an elegant relaxed couple deep in thought travelling slowly and wistfully in the opposite direction. The beautiful young woman casts a split-second glance of enquiry and appraisal in my direction. Momentarily I am completely off balance. I immediately reflect - to assuage my amour propre that – what it would have been to have a glance like that from her mother - then more realistically - from her grandmother? I shuffle slowly home – reflecting that every dog has his day as I had mine – and satisfied that at least I’ve had my share of wonderful memories!
Annex

An account of a first trip I made to Cairo to present a paper at the FIRST Egyptian Symposium on Housing and Reconstruction in December 1976

Introduction

Recently, in February 2014 as I was clearing out old superfluous documents and papers I came across this handwritten note of the events I made for Daphne. My participation with a paper was encouraged by the State Agency the Irish Export Board (CTT) and by my senior partner, Desmond MacGreevy. I was thirty three. It’s written just after Dara and Garrett were born. Both were very young. The trip served as a prelude to my later transfer with CTT to a base in Dusseldorf, West Germany, the following year. I little knew then I would be back on extended missions to Egypt on several occasions.

Overall, I thought it amusing and feel I’m probably the only person who could read the often garbled handwriting. Here it is for what it’s worth.

Rome, 16th December 1976

Written at a table at Il Defuro’s Restaurant (I think!), Corso Vittorio Emmanuelle II.

Rome is a city full of contrasts; with the type of spontaneity and movement as well as calm and serenity which we would enjoy very much together. After dark there is a particular contrast between the dimly-lit old medieval streets and the bright sophisticated shopping areas. It’s like a large, very much larger Grafton Street with the Carmelite Church and all the alleyways. In the traffic chaos the policeman with whiter than white hats – and whiter than white tempers – keep up the din whenever a pause occurs by blowing fiercely into their whistles. I saw a white Jaguar crashed into a bollard and a crowd gathered around. Some were obviously happy at its fate while others were saddened that such a beautiful thing had come to such a murky end. The police cars drove like cowboys through the traffic snarl with sirens screaming – all business!

The city is dressed for Christmas. The finery I’ve noted; both the dazzling windows and the equally dazzling women are superb. But I fear that the beauty might be a little brittle! It occurs to me that that anyone who dresses that well and uses that amount of time at making up - might be like our Waterford glass.

I’ve strolled around the town for three hours since I arrived (and was waiting for my airline connection). I went up the Spanish Steps and down the pedestrianized – or nearly pedestrianized Via di Condittiori, the most exquisite street you could imagine. The general overall impression is of old gold and elegance. It was full of young and
old gossiping and gesticulating in groups. The men with long coats and scarfs like
Toulouse Lautrec posters with very beautiful women. Romans appear to enjoy
promenading through the town after work. At 9.30pm the streets were still crowded. I
should imagine that the Via di Condittiori the place where the exclusive young and
not so young Romans go to study their reflections. In marked contrast to the stolid
healthy Germany everyone here seems to smoke and by the appearance of the pastas
and doughnuts – they are well on the way to Hell’s Gates! The bars, unlike Dublin,
being glazed and open from the street have no safe hiding places. I saw as I passed
two traffic policemen knocking down small ones. I felt they might need them after
their exertions.

I went past the Castell San Angelo and up the broad thoroughfare towards St Peters.
The Castle looked formidable. I noticed a few cracks in the lower courses of
brickwork. Cellini must have had a great view of Rome and the Tiber and the Spanish
from the battlements. I think I shall try to go there tomorrow morning.

I didn’t go the whole way to St Peters. It looked dark and sombre and I was looking
for the gay lights. I lost my way for about half an hour until I came to the Piazza
Navarre. It was once the Circus, I think of Caracalla. You remember the fountains at
both ends. There was a market there with stools selling toys and cakes and sweets and
there were rifle ranges and juke boxes and machines all brilliantly lit up. I bought nut
cake held together with syrup and wished you were there to taste the chocolate. Later
in a café I bought a big doughnut and a diminutive cup of coffee which didn’t even
moisten it.

I’m now finishing my demi litre of red wine. The waiter speaks some English and
wanted to know where I came from. He thought Ireland was Holland until I rasped out
“you will know of Belfast!” He did. The hotelier when I signed in remarked jovially
as he looked at my passport “Ah! Another Dubliner!”

The Romans eat in style. The dinner in a place vaguely like Bewley’s but very
reminiscent of another place called Vincent’s in Brussels (what a cosmopolitan I’ve
become) is very good and seems to be patronised by Mr and Mrs Roman Citizen.
There is a little girl about two who keeps rearranging the chairs far from her base with
Mama and who receives pleasant little pats from the waiters as they pass. The meal
has cost very little more than you would expect in Dublin, possibly less counting all
my wine.

I like the Roman temperament – all fuss and drama. The city could do without some
of the traffic. About forty per cent of the cars are little Fiat 500. They don’t look so
intimidating. My hotel is different. There’s a high ceillinged bedroom, shutters and a
bathroom which is functional and elegant in its own little way. It reminds me of the
old elegance of that film “the Leopard”. I’ve bared my teeth at taxi-men and at the
kind, rather elderly gentleman, who told me the city information office was closed and
then made off with my suitcase in the direction of his hotel at a rate of knots.
Somehow I feel we got over the language barrier. I just hope I’m old enough to be let
out on my own in Cairo. I’m not forgetting my dysentery pills. I’d rather not think of
arriving in Cairo at 9pm with no reservations tomorrow. There isn’t an earlier plane.
I take back whatever I said about the luxurious disposition of my room. It seems that since ‘urbs condita’ the problem of noise has yet to be solved. My room overlooks the Via Nazionale and the traffic din never ceased all through the night. This morning, after checking out of my hotel and using my American Express card for the first time and feeling a little elated by the experience – especially not being called back – I went strolling down the Via Nazionale past the Markets of Trajan when out of the corner of my eye I spotted Trajan’s Column. I could spend hours looking at the figures, so modern and so realistic and yet telling us so much about life in ancient Rome. It appears that the plaques were cut out of marble approximately 300cm x 300 cm and fixed to a brick backing. This must have required a meticulous setting out for the alignment of the figures and particularly when the curved surface of the column is taken into account. I then went up the backstairs past the Museum de la Resigorinomento to the top of the Capital Hill, to the Palace Square to have another look at the Marcus Aurelius statue. Some horse, some horseman! It’s a pity some Christian wouldn’t depict Christ on an ass in the same way. Maybe of course it wouldn’t be possible. It took a pagan to cast Marcus. I didn’t like the Dioscuri very much. They may have their origins in ancient history but they look as if they were cast in reinforced concrete to decorate some supermarket or bank entrance. They appear vulgar. Give me Marcus Aurelius anytime.

I looked down on the Forum. It hasn’t changed very much since we saw it last. Maybe there’s a little more rust on the metal cramps. That’s about all. I think now that if we came to Rome it wouldn’t be for its Imperial past. Oh no! It would be to salute the arrogance, the colour and the dash about town. I enjoyed it all very much. Ireland would, I suppose to a Roman visitor, appear a halfway house to the sort of antiseptic atmosphere of northern Europe. He would recognise the beggars on O’Connell Bridge. I’ve seen little girls begging here in bare feet. The lifestyle wouldn’t be that different – maybe a little more Spartan. More big cars and fewer of the little Fiats the Romans like to take their chances in. Speaking of cars I wonder does the taxi style reflect the national GDP. In Belgium and of course in Germany they are all Mercedes. Here they are all Fiat cars.

On my arrival at the airport I rang Aer Lingus to see if there was any message. There wasn’t. I then looked for something to eat as whatever about lunch and the evening meal the Roman breakfast is a bit skimpy. Imagine how thrilled I was to follow the signs indicating Ristorante to find the caterers were all on strike! In this instance my decision to eat when you can was justified. I eventually got two sandwiches and a bottle of wine. The duty free shops are also on strike! I’m now sitting down with a packet of Mr Cavour’s cigars and an empty stomach. I hope that lunch will be served early on the Rome – Cairo flight. I’ve re-read my paper and don’t think it’s either too banal or too involved, so my tail is high.

Italy is the first time for a good while that I don’t have a smattering of the language, apart from a bit of Latin. It’s funny but my first inclination has been to try a bit with French or German which no one understands. Happily, the average has only to look at me and then try some English. I did however have great fun sketching the pencil case for Dara. My only criticism of the city is the wish that all the little policemen might put away their hardware. Next stop Cairo.
Not quite: I’m writing this in the transit lounge of Athens Airport. But Oh! Those Greeks! With probably Theodorakis’ music playing in the background they lifted 2,200 Italian lire for one Nescafe and two crescent-shaped cakes. The Alitalia embargo on ‘Ristorante’ extends to aeroplanes and so I landed with my stomach rattling. The Greeks brought us transit passengers in – and then fleeced us with a gleam in their eyes. For a fleeting transitory impression it was a lasting one!

*The next piece I’ve written in Irish. Translated it reads:*

Now I’m in Cairo. It’s a strange place and the impression I have is straight out of the film Lawrence of Arabia. There’s certainly a difference between the jet-set people who are as you can expect to see in every airport in Europe and the masses I’m seeing. As we come inside I see a lot of suitcases and assorted packages strewn across the ground outside the entrances. I prayed that the same fate wouldn’t await my suitcase. There was no notice whatever to be seen about the Symposium but here were people wrapped up in traditional garb to be seen everywhere. I waved to some person and he took me with him into a car along with my suitcase which I had retrieved without damage. On the way into the city he advised me that his family had worked for the British from 1882 to 1948 and he was through them quite familiar with both British and Irish history and especially the Royal Irish Fusiliers. I hoped to myself in the dark that the self-same Fusiliers had been nice to his family.

As the taxi stopped at traffic lights a lady came out of another stopped car on our right, passed us by and then entered another car on our left. My taxi driver observed she was a lady of the night and was working hard.

Well, it’s 11.30pm and I’ve no idea as to where this Symposium is to take place or where I’ll be spending tomorrow and successive nights. I’m very tired. Good night!

*End of Irish piece…*

18th December

It’s 11.50pm and I’m in my 14th floor bedroom suite of the Meridien Hotel overlooking the Nile. Today was a long day. I was up and out of the hotel very much intact by 8am. I caught a taxi which was an old battered Fiat with the handles missing and the windows permanently down. My previous taxi-driver had told me my destination was only five minutes by car. We crossed the Nile passing the crowds of people moving into the city and the buses jammed full with people hanging on outside the doors. In contrast, the Nile appeared calm and serene while car horns blew incessantly.

For a long time I felt we were lost but things got worse until the taxi stopped outside an old house. It had the right number but it had only recently been changed. I was informed that street names were changed and the numbers revised fairly regularly. Unfortunately the driver spoke no English, or even French or German. Luckily the house was the Swiss Centre for the Recovery of Egyptian Artefacts and the curators, a kindly, elderly dedicated couple, spoke Arabic and phoned the Ministry, got the right address and overall were terribly helpful to me. I shall always be grateful to them and the Swiss.

We arrived at the Symposium dead on time at 10am. I had brought my suitcase which didn’t look well. It looked as if I’d arrived direct from the airport. It was checked out
by security. Then I was given my symposium briefcase with bags of papers. I knocked the taxi driver back from £5 to £4 for the trip. Maybe even at that discount I was done. One paper at the Symposium advised that the average worker earned about £1.50 per day!

I learned the Symposium wasn’t attempting to find a way for producing architects, engineers, quantity surveyors or construction managers/planners. Their targets are much more fundamental. They were aiming at producing foremen and skilled drivers and mechanics. The Symposium Secretary was terribly kind. He wondered if I could condense my paper to two or three pages or whether I would like to leave it as a background paper. I chose the latter. He also arranged a meeting with the officials who administer the construction budgets for Tuesday next. It means extending my stay but isn’t that what the whole purpose of my visit was in the first place?

The Symposium is held under a plaque of the Egyptian buzzard (or eagle) and the benevolent gaze of portraits of Nasser and Sadat. The auditorium resembles the Kinema in DIT, Bolton Street, although much, much larger. The building is the HQ of the Arab Social Union. There have been so far no papers presented by foreigners. One speaker did reveal that there had been twenty earlier meetings concerning the papers. The questions put appear to have been somewhat orchestrated and are ably cleared by an elderly but formidable individual. I crossed the Nile again to go and visit the Irish Embassy. There are lots of troops and armed police about. Soldiers guard the bridges. However, everyone appears to be amiable and I haven’t found a sour individual yet.

I passed a black clad beggar woman with her child and gave her a small donation. It was a note and I had lots of small denomination Egyptian notes rolled together. I unfortunately revealed the roll of notes to her and she wasn’t satisfied with the 25p I had offered her. Neither were her lady friends. They pursued me almost all the way back to the hotel.

This evening we went to a trade exhibition. As our cars pulled in we were met by a military band looking like the FCA with pipes and instruments blazing away. The exhibition showed traditional construction models as well as sections of engines and details of the construction courses carried out for craft technicians in the local Technical School. I very much appreciated the enthusiasm and dedication of the exhibitors.

The ILO observer to the Symposium is from Glasnevin, Dublin, and a graduate Bolton Street mechanical engineer. He went on to graduate with a PhD at Ohio State College before spending 20 years with the UN, UNICEF, USAID and the ILO rehabilitation programmes in Korea, Afghanistan, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Egypt – you name it. He is married to an Iranian girl and they have one son. They are thinking of settling down in Dublin. I asked him to give me details of his CV for passing to Irish organisations especially AnCO. In return I asked him to let me know of any jobs of short-term duration in interesting places.

We went out for a bottle of beer on the town coming back about 9pm through the crowds and the traffic snarl-ups in time for dinner here in my hotel. Dinner was beautiful, pleasant and dry. My hotel, the Meridien, is lush. It’s fourteen stories high and stands fan-shaped overlooking the Nile. But it’s brash and far too opulent for my
taste. The contrast between the likes of us here in it and the poverty of the rest of the population out there is staggering.

Sunday, 19th December

This has been another long day with little sleep due to the pressure I feel in re-writing my paper so that it will not exceed ten minutes coupled with the problem I have in altering the whole slant from the original focus on construction costs and budgets to aspects of construction management and training. I have been told I’ll be the fourth speaker on Monday. I had planned to spend several hours in the afternoon on re-writing but while listening to the other papers I was paged from the Auditorium by Dr Salah Said, the Professor of Architecture, whom I had arranged to meet.

We hit it off with each other immediately. He is wealthy with a new Peugeot 504 car which impressed. He is building an apartment house for his extended family in the centre of Cairo, a city where most people including craftsmen and recent graduates earn about £7.50 per week. I bought him dinner in the Nile Hilton Hotel. The full bill came to £6 for both of us. I’m glad rates for entertainment are low in Cairo. If he comes to Dublin then it will be his turn.

He drove me to see the Pyramids at Giza which are about eight miles from the Nile on elevated ground with the Sphinx just a little below carved out from the sandstone. The Pyramids are situated in a group of three almost at the point where the line between the green vegetation irrigated by the Nile and the desert meets. From the plateau it is a marvellous sight to look across the green belt to the foothills comprising the borders of the desert to the East. The Pyramids were not as high as I had expected. The highest was between 150 and 200 feet. But the group taken together reveals a massive, quiet dignity. Salah explained that they were built during thirty flood seasons and it is believed as an exercise in some form of religious observation rather than with slave labour. It was beautiful to sip lemon tea on a veranda, which had at one time been a part of the palace of the deposed King Farouk, and enjoying the summer-type sunshine while looking down on the city of Cairo below.

From there I was driven to Old Cairo, to the Citadel and into one of the massive ancient mosques which I entered in the twilight wearing socks over my shoes. The mosques and the old Islamic University, indeed most of the Moslem religious buildings appear to have a great deal in common with the Roman Church. The minarets dominate the hillside in the same way. Salah al Said invited me home to meet his family. We entered a heavily built four storey house where three generations live and with servants in their off-white robes waiting on his wife. Their five year old child was learning his letters in Arabic script much as Dara is learning his. His wife was young, very good looking and dressed very chic – but a little over weight. Cakes were produced and the grandfather came down to meet and inspect me much as Dad would a stranger in the house. We all kept our knees together I managed to avoid dropping or spilling anything. They were very proper and correct but shy, or so it appeared to me.

On Sunday evening I phoned the Irish Charge d’Affaires, but then discovered I had a great aptitude for getting lost in the streets of Cairo. They twist and turn and after a short while you feel that you are reeling. In this condition I spotted a taxi and headed

31 Thirty years later this was the Hotel where I stayed from January to June 2007.
off for a reception under canvas in Sahara City. The City is a huge nightclub out in the desert in the shadow of the three pyramids where I had been earlier in the afternoon. We squatted low on chairs and had numerous plates of spiced meat dishes while we listened to and were entertained with traditional music and dancing, the music played by a band of Bedouin, which was not that different from Irish music and seannos. I haven’t made up my mind about the belly-dancers. They are fascinating to see – particularly the attractive girls. Their movements with hands and feet are very light and gay. There’s nothing, I’ll be honest nearly nothing overtly sensual about their dance. My Egyptian friend who subsequently invited me to take part in another dance was very annoyed with the term ‘belly-dancer’. He insisted they were respectfully called Eastern dancers. The girls are professional dancers and he explained that in most Egyptian houses daughters practice it at some time or another.

The Technical Director of the Ministry of Housing who is also a nephew of the previous Minister as well as being a Director of the largest Egyptian construction firm drove me home in his very large Mercedes and commented on the paper I had submitted as we drove back to the city.

We got back at 2.30am and I started to re-write my paper; slanting it away from the original and attempting to sell An Foras Forbartha and AnCO, the manpower service for what it was worth. The purpose of my visit I reckoned was not to be loftily academic but to sell myself, Ireland and the lot. Needless to remark I didn’t sleep much that night.

My name was called. Very anxiously I made my way to the podium. The lights were on and I couldn’t see my audience although I gestured to them. As I lectured I began to enjoy myself and went way over time. The audience was in their thousands but as some cynic remarked later “only about a couple of hundred understood English!”

Monday, 20th December

My paper was the shortest and, if I may say so, one of the clearest of those of the foreign participants. I had no option but to be brief. I spoke very slowly and as soon as I started the butterflies departed and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I honestly feel that my paper was about 90% factual – if a bit overplayed. I’m a little surprised to remark that about six of the other delegations as well as Egyptians have prodded me for more facts. I certainly treated the respective Irish Government Departments in far too favourable a light. But in summation I think it is pointless to prepare a paper for a symposium in any other than in very broad detail. The trend of the other papers, the atmosphere of the meeting, the audience will all dictate that papers should adapted to relate to these issues. The Finns, Norwegians and Swedes didn’t seem to appreciate this and went on and on. The British speakers were good. The Yanks pushed a bit too hard.

The other Irishman from the ILO got into a bit of a tangle when the slide projector failed in the middle of his paper leaving him a teeny, weeny bit in the air. He later told me he was impressed with my paper and asked for a copy.

That afternoon I went to see the Irish Charges d’Affaires and found him to be a very decent man. He gave me all the help he could plus a great deal of background along
with offers of help for any future occasions. He apologised that he had only been in place for two months. His wife and half of his family were still in Dublin while his First Secretary is only due to arrive in January 2008. The Embassy has only been in operation for about two years. We sat back in his beautiful office in Garden City drinking brandy after a lunch served by his two domestic servants.

Two of his daughters are with him. They are aged about fourteen and eighteen. Socially he was concerned at the much older ages of potential local suitors who had begun to hang around the house. The girls were on tippy-toes with excitement at seeing a friend from TCD who is over to row in the Nile Regatta. It couldn’t have done his sense of vanity any good if he were to have known the excitement his visit had generated. Their father just nodded indulgently over his brandy glass. There are about fifty Irish nationals he knows of living in Cairo as well as the hospital run by the Irish Missionary Union – of all people – on a contract with the Egyptian Government. He was leaving that evening for their desert hospital with Christmas presents for them. Unfortunately he wasn’t even with the best will in the world able to do a great deal for me apart from getting letters typed and then having them distributed. He remarked that the post in Cairo is very cheap and the service you got was about value for money!

(I was penning this note looking down from the aeroplane on the Suez Canal. There’s desert all about and a large lake in the middle. I also have a note to the effect that £25 per month is a good salary but a sum of about £1,000 is payable as a bride price).

Well stoked up I went back for the concluding speeches, to give my thanks and appreciation for having been invited as a presenter and to more or less record I had been there until the end. Afterwards with the concluding dinner in the Sheraton Hotel there was a lot of food and of course the Eastern belly-dancers. The senior police officer/minder present was invited to dance with one. It was obvious he wanted to but I noted one of his aides pulled him away. The security services of the Ministry of the Interior must be above reproach! It did occur to me as I waited with the eighty or so men and about two women forming a square around the small dance floor area of the reception hall that I couldn’t see an Irish girl breezing into the centre of such a group to show off her navel and backside. Maybe they might! I should observe that the receptions etc. are dry. There are lots of kebabs, lamb cutlets, salads of all descriptions, which I avoided like the plague and innumerable glasses of orange and other citrus fruit juices served all the time. I honestly didn’t remark on the omission of alcohol. Very little drinking appears to be done – even by the more westernised and wealthier sections of the community I engaged with. The Koran discourages it.

Speaking of dysentery, when I bade farewell to the Symposium Secretary I stated quite truthfully to him that I had received nothing but kindness from those Egyptians I had had the pleasure to meet. He replied and others had said it to me before that I should drink the Nile water to ensure I would return. I responded along the lines that I was reluctant to face the prospect of being carried home on a litter, wracked with dysentery. This amused him.

One or two of the public relations people; plain-clothes police who have been designated to look after the speakers were somewhat oily but amusing in their own
way. One in particular is a real heavy. He is the one who took commission on the
reduction he negotiated for me with the taxi driver who brought me to the Sahara City
nightclub. He looks after me with big bear hugs and I have the feeling he’s looking for
more commission. He mentioned something about visiting me and the trip to the
airport. I gave him the slip last night and he wasn’t around when I left early for the
airport at 5.30am this morning.

Tuesday, 21st December

I was tired last night. I wrote letters for typing and didn’t sleep as well as I might
have. At 8am the bus left for Ismailia, the city which was very largely destroyed
during the Israeli thrust during the last war. Incidentally, while everyone talks of the
war there is seldom an explicit reference to Israelis. Even my Irish friend, who
probably knows best from his UN connection, always refers to the Israelis here as
“that other country”.

We drove down a long straight road through the desert with sand dunes up to about
three hundred feet on each side; looking like miniature versions of the Sugar Loaf in
Wicklow. Every so often there were military checkpoints while off the road we could
see concentrations of troops and armour. Once again the contrast between the fertile
areas irrigated by the Nile and the desert stood out vividly.

Ismailia has been largely reconstructed since the war. It looks a lot like the eight
storey apartment developments at Ballymun except that they are much more labour-
intensive being built with reinforced floors and columns – no sign of pre-casting. The
blocks had outer walls of coursed stone much lie we would build in granite. There
was a reception and the general who is responsible for the reconstruction, dressed in
civvies of course, gave us a detailed breakdown of outputs along with future targets.
He spoke with a sense of deserved pride of what had been accomplished. It was very
good but I had the impression it will be much more congested than Ballymun ever
was and with even less facilities. Bullet holes were to be seen on walls all over the
city. Modern warfare is certainly destructive.

Then followed a visit to a rudimentary training centre consisting of a single storey
block divided into simple classrooms where the inductees are trained in the basic
skills for construction for four months before being sent out on site. It was immensely
interesting to see the lads working away. In the plumbing class they worked so hard
taking and sawing that I thought if we didn’t leave soon one or two of them might have
burst a blood vessel! Paradoxically, some of the skills being thought were
anachronistic by western standards; having been phased out in favour of more
hygienic and cheaper mass-produced components. These included lead piping and
wiped joints, internal door joinery but perhaps most impressive because most obvious
was the concrete shuttering which was highly labour intensive but with unsatisfactory
techniques of jointing between the boards. So a lot of the concrete dribbles out
causing a risk of structural problems requiring the factor of safety to be substantially
increased with resultant higher actual construction costs. I noted the concrete element
in the apartment blocks was very high. Huge quantities must have been involved. It
was all mixed by hand. I was further told that the labourers often forgot their
cement/sand gauge boxes. This had to be another area of anxiety for the future.

Following our visit to the centre we embarked on a sizeable tug and went out onto the
larger lake which forms part of the Suez Canal proper. I have been so fortunate
during this trip to see and visit places I have read about for years yet never expected to see like the Pyramids, the Citadel of Cairo, Old Cairo, the Suez Canal and Shepheard’s Hotel, the rebuilt version, that it will take some time to sort out and correlate them. We sailed past the World War II monument on the west side of the Canal, then we crossed and sailed along the Bar-Levi constructed by the Israelis which was stormed by the Egyptians during the last time out. After tea on the roof veranda of a coffee house we returned home to Cairo. Unfortunately, for part of the time until I fobbed her off I was being pestered by a young and not very attractive lady from one of the universities who bombarded me with buzzwords such as ‘economic goals’, ‘national plans’, economic priorities.

Back at my hotel I again lost my way to the Irish Embassy. Once again when I enquired the way a German-speaking Egyptian gentleman drove me back to the hotel in his car. He would accept nothing in return. He said he was just pleased to be of assistance.

At 7.30 pm Salah Said and his wife Maghdi called to take me to the Suk. The Suk is the old artisan’s quarter of the city and is laid out very close to the huge mosques in the old part of Cairo. The place throbbed with life with lights and we went down narrow passageways with bazaars, stalls and small shops selling everything from silver to furniture to leather goods. Daphne you would have been in your element\(^\text{32}\). The Saids suggested I should buy Daphne some silver as it was good value. I was a little relieved to see that they had little idea of the state of our current finances after we bought the house in Malahide. Daphne you mightn’t have liked the Egyptian styles anyway. Instead I bought a poof and some small camels for Dara and Garrett at more reasonable prices. Passing by the entrance to a mosque I looked in to see ceremonies in full swing with lots of chandeliers blazing forth light. It was very, very reminiscent of a Catholic Cathedral during business hours.

I was under the impression that having invited the Saids that I was going to be the host when we went to see some traditional music and the Eastern dancers for another time at a cabaret in my hotel. He insisted on paying. There was no way I would be allowed to. He pointed out that I had paid on an earlier occasion. I now realise what the Charges d’Affaires meant when he talked of their pride as hosts.

The cabaret was immensely interesting and was probably the most polished performance of all. A group of three young men and women displayed in dance the motions of the traders who go out in the small boats to sell goods to the liners passing through Port Said. This had to be one of the highlights. The traditional music is just as intriguing and fascinating as the dancers and the Eastern Dancing for the stranger. I formed an opinion that Salah and Maghdi might be quite nationalistic from their reactions during the portion of the programme given over to English language and French and Italian pop songs.

(As I write this piece I’m looking down on a large island partially hidden by clouds. It must be Crete. In the distance penetrating through the clouds are five or six mountain peaks. They are probably some of the mountains of the smaller Greek islands strung

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\(^{32}\) Daphne came out to Cairo with Dara in 2007 and they both loved the Suk.
out across this part of the Mediterranean. In twenty minutes time we land in Athens. I’ve set my camera and I hope to try a shot from the air.

We’ve landed in Athens but I can’t for the love of me see any sign of the Acropolis. The mountains seem to be very close to the city. They are bare with small areas of scrub and with occasional green pockets. I see a Greek Orthodox Church immediately beside the airport and lots of US and Greek warplanes on the tarmac. There are pretty little islands with marinas packed with boats of all descriptions just off the coast.

Transit passengers are to remain on board this time. I’m happy enough to remain on board after having been fleeced the last time here in Athens.

A feature of the whole trip has been the experience of being just one of all the various nationalities mixed together for the symposium. Last night in the hotel the Saids pointed out as well as Egyptians, Saudis, Armenians, Sudanese, Greeks, Americans, Europeans and Turks – Maghdi is of Turkish descent and wasn’t too impressed when I observed to her that I marvelled at her classical Greek features. I saw a girl who could have been from Dublin and I put her down to have been descended from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers or some such. Locals reckon that the Arab traders dislodged from Beirut in the ongoing war have settled in Cairo. It was also mentioned that some of the tensions generated by the civil war in the Lebanon had begun to spill over between the Muslim and Christian (Coptic) populations here in Cairo. Strangely enough, the Catholic and other Christian churches I saw in Cairo appeared to be modelled more on the mosques than on any Roman Basilicas. Salah did point out some perfect Gothic windows in one of the mosques we passed.

I was advised to allow two hours for getting through the facilities at Cairo Airport. I wouldn’t have got through in less. First I went through the passport check then there was another queue to join, then a further one for passport examination, another to change back any Egyptian pounds as they are not allowed to be taken outside the country. Then finally through the departure passport check and into the duty-free area and one last quick check before boarding the airport bus to the plane. Each time everything is written down and stamped, a strip put into the passport and the remainder filed.

Eventually we are through for a cup of lemon tea with the public relations people – not the earlier ones. The man who interviews me is a likeable bright young man who regularly wheedles trips to his brothers and friends in London, Paris and Rome. Apparently the Russians took more from the Egyptians than they left after the previous war – or so he said. The Americans are not popular either. The Europeans are poor but not so poor as the Egyptians. According to my friend they have the best heads!

The discussion we had on marriage was insightful. A graduate such as he can earn only about £25 Egyptian a month in the first year of employment. In order to marry he would have by custom to pay £1,000 to the bride’s parents. If he loved a girl and truly wanted to get married he was under obligation to inform his parents. They would then inspect the girl and meet her family to bargain. If his family said ‘no’ – then the deal was off. It was likewise if the bride’s father also said ‘no’. On the other hand if the
bride said ‘no’ and her father said ‘yes’ then the deal remained on regardless of the bride’s objections.

Asked if extra-curricular activities resulting in the girl expecting a baby would reduce the bride price demanded he responded that he supposed it might but that I should know that the bride’s family would ensure there were no opportunities for the couple to meet and make love. He complained it wouldn’t be so bad if the girl would continue working so as to pay back the cost. He complained that the women are all the same. They get married and then they say “I don’t want to work. I want to have a child.”

I reassured him that things couldn’t be always so black for him. But he didn’t see any light coming down the tunnel as far as he was concerned. I felt genuinely sorry for him. He explained that for thousands of the popular classes like him there was no prospect of finding a wife. Interesting points made on the same topic and confirmed by Salah and Maghdi were that a wife may divorce her husband if such a clause is included in the marriage contract. A husband on the other hand can simply divorce his wife by telling her he divorces her. He is then, subsequent to the announcement, allowed two chances to reconsider his position and to take her back from her parents’ house. Guardianship of the children in the event of divorce is the wife’s by right until the age of six when they must be handed over to the husband. The only ground a wife has to retain them is if she can prove that the husband is morally or otherwise disqualified.

I’ve noticed a number of Saudis travelling. I’ve noted them to be small and either very thin or very stout. The men dress in their linen full length garment complete with expensive fountain pen and are accompanied by their wife or manservant. I observed a Saudi with two small children boarding the plane, the father a very young slight man left responsibility for looking after the children to his plump little wife while he talks with a local police officer. I noticed too that as he boarded the bus to the plane he took out and opened his wallet for the police officer to choose the notes for some or other service provided. It’s different.

I now conclude. It will be obvious that I found the Egyptians to be an attractive people. Great poverty exists for sure and I contrasted this with the opulence in which I lived as a guest of the Egyptian Government. Yet I found them to be very much alive, ready to smile and those who could afford it were generous to a fault and very proud to show it.